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Contesting national belonging: An established-outsider figuration on the margins of Thessaloniki, Greece

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Publication date
2013

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Pratsinakis, E. (2013). *Contesting national belonging: An established-outsider figuration on the margins of Thessaloniki, Greece*.

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Adopting and negating categories – (un)making groups and identities

7.1 Contesting Greekness

Native Greeks and the ‘False Greeks’

Natives who wanted to highlight the Greekness of the immigrant population in Nikopoli employed the official terms ‘repatriates’ (*palinostoúntes*) and ‘co-ethnics’ (*homogenís*), and less commonly the corrective word ‘Greek-Pontics’ (*ellinopóntií*). They also used the word ‘refugee’, which, in Greek (*prósfygas*) evokes the experience of the 1920s refugees and constitutes a term of honour (Voutira, 2003). Calling FSU Greeks *prósfyges* positively frames their migration and highlights their rightful belonging in the nation, which is further emphasized in the compound word Greek-refugees (*Ellinoprósfyges*).¹⁶⁹

However, they most frequently called their FSU Greek neighbours ‘Russians’, ‘Russo-phones’ and ‘Russo-Pontics’. The categories ‘Russian’ and ‘Russo-phones’ were used synonymously to refer to people of various FSU backgrounds, rather than people of Russian descent per se. The use of the word ‘Russo-Pontic’ was more ambivalent. In accordance to its literal meaning, it was used to distinguish

¹⁶⁹Interestingly, two of my native informants used the word Russian-refugees (*Russoprósfyges*) to the same purpose. Although literally this word does not signify any relation to a Greek lineage, it was evoked by them as a positive alternative to the word ‘Russo-Pontic’ without any intention to cast doubt on their Greekness. The Russo-Pontic label is generally avoided by the people who wish to speak positively about the FSU Greeks.

the FSU Greeks of Pontic descent from the ‘native Pontics’, the descendants of the 1920s Pontic refugees. As opposed to ‘the Russian’, it was occasionally evoked to discern the Greek from the non-Greek FSU immigrants. However, most commonly it was used similarly to the other two categories: as an all-inclusive label for the whole Russian-speaking community in the neighbourhood which expressed a doubt about their claimed Greekness. The words of Stathis are indicative:

The Russo-Pontics... of course there are different ways to refer to them and I know that the proper one is ‘*homogenís* immigrants from the FSU’. However I call them Russo-Pontics because I know that they are not Greeks. The majority are Georgian, Armenian etc., only a few of them have Greek roots and Greek consciousness.

In the dominant native perception, Greek-descent immigrants comprise a minority in Nikopoli, estimated from 5% to 20% of the total immigrant population.¹⁷⁰ These estimations reverse the actual population composition in the neighbourhood. According to the GEITONIES randomly selected sample of 102 immigrant households, Greek-descent immigrants account for more than 80 per cent of the total immigrant population in Nikopoli. The Greekness of a large segment of the FSU Greek population in Nikopoli was denied by the native residents.

Native residents doubted the Greekness of their FSU Greek neighbours with reference to their supposedly insufficient Greek language skills, their speaking Russian or other non-Greek languages in public, the fact that ‘they spend long hours drinking and chatting in the streets’, the television satellite discs in their houses, and posters and banners in the Russian language.¹⁷¹ Phrases such as ‘if they were real Greeks, they would not be watching Russian television’, ‘...they would not choose to speak Russian’, and so on, were commonly echoed by my native contacts. These instances were not referred to as the results of acculturation or as indicative of the ties which FSU Greeks have developed with the countries in which they grew up and were socialized. Their cultural difference was thought of as expressing their supposedly ‘non-Greek consciousness’ and was

¹⁷⁰ Only 12 out of 58 native residents, either asked in the context of the GEITONIES survey or met during my fieldwork in Nikopol, acknowledged the majority of the Russian-speaking immigrants in the neighbourhood as Greeks.

¹⁷¹ Fewer people made reference to immigrants’ supposedly non-Greek physical characteristics to support their claims. Michalis, himself of Pontic origin, told me: ‘It is quite obvious. When you see the other guy being blond you can understand. We, Pontics, are all dark haired.’ However, since the blond immigrants in the neighbourhood comprise a negligible minority, such comments were uncommon.

taken as proof of their lack of actual Greek descent. Their Greekness was essentially challenged in racial terms.

The doubts of native Greeks about the Greekness of FSU Greeks responded to two beliefs they harboured. The first is the assumption that there is a universal Greek culture which characterizes all Greeks around the globe. The second is the conviction that a Greek who happens to have lost (aspects of) his or her Greek culture naturally feels the urge to regain it. According to this thinking, FSU Greeks who for instance ‘prefer speaking’ Russian to Greek in public cannot be Greeks.

Information about a restricted number of non-Greek immigrants who managed to acquire Greek citizenship by passing as FSU Greeks, the so-called issue of ‘illegal hellenizations’ (παράνομες ελληνοποιήσεις), had already attracted some media attention in the 1990s. However, it was most probably the alleged 2000s voting scandal (see chapter 4.2, pp. 89-91) that had contributed to popularizing the belief that this was a widespread practice. This belief was widely shared by the native residents in Nikopoli, who in many cases discussed their views about their immigrant neighbours with reference to the state policy. Tasia, a middle-aged lady working in a family business and living in old Nikopoli, told me the following in the context of a conversation about her daughter’s university entry exams:

even in university the ‘Russians’ are prioritized (*sic*)¹⁷² and elsewhere they are promoted. In the public sector... They have filled the civil sector, and they are not Greeks, they are Chechens, Armenians... Turko-phones, how do they call those? [referring to the FSU Greeks from Tsalka]. The postman was here the other day. I told him, ‘you come everyday and you serve me, take a rest, let me offer you a cup of coffee’. He told me they all have identity cards with different names. They are the catastrophe of Greece if they do not leave, the state will collapse, the funds will get empty. In fact they are leaving the country and they are taking pensions from here, how long have they worked in Greece to be entitled for a pension?¹⁷³

Tasia challenged the authenticity of the FSU Greek immigrants’ Greekness in order to question their entitlement to support by the state. Conversely, Fotini, a

¹⁷² Only a number of positions are reserved to foreign graduates of Greek descent, not only FSU Greek, and are given after written examinations in Greek language.

¹⁷³ FSU Greeks cannot transfer their pension rights from the former Soviet Union. The elderly receive a pension from the OGA, a public insurance company, which equals the minimum Greek pension.

middle-aged native Greek lady of Pontic descent also living in old Nikopoli, attested to the Greekness of her older tenants to justify their benefits:

they mentioned the word Greece and they got emotional, they even named their little girl Athena. They fully deserve [χαλάλι] the benefits they are taking in order to build their life here since they are Greeks.

Just as with the majority of native Greeks in Nikopoli, Tasia and Fotini did not question the ideology underling the state policy. The ‘moral obligation’ of the Greek state to support Greeks ‘returning home’ was not contested by them. It was its inability to prevent the inflow of ‘false Greeks’ that they condemned.

The ‘false Greeks’ figured prominently in discussions by native residents in Nikopoli about the immigrants in the neighbourhood. They formed an imagined category that accommodated the negative attitudes of the natives regarding the local immigrants without challenging the official criteria of national belonging and dominant perceptions about the supposed qualities of Greeks. As illustrated in a number of quotes in chapter 6, the alleged false Greekness of the immigrants in Nikopoli was used by native residents to justify negative attitudes about them. Conversely, their perceived aggressive, unkind, and unsociable behaviour was presented as evidence that they are not Greeks. Simplistically, the dominant idea could be articulated as follows: they are not nice neighbours so they can’t be Greek; they are not Greek and that’s why they are not nice neighbours.

The evocation of the ‘false Greek’ category not only secured the ideology of Greekness but helped reinforce it through an attribution of ‘good characteristics’ to ‘true Greek’ immigrants and bad characteristics to the ‘false Greeks’. Speaking the Pontic Greek dialect, following Greek religious or national customs, as well as fluency in Greek were all referred to as convincing evidence of an immigrant’s Greekness. Nevertheless, in everyday life, reference to the abovementioned criteria was made in a very flexible way. Native Greeks used them selectively to exclude those exhibiting behaviours not approved by them. For instance, when a person speaks the Greek Pontic dialect, this alone made him/her a repatriate from the former Soviet Union in the eyes of the natives. Proficiency in Pontic Greek is very convincing proof of an immigrant’s Greek descent since this language is not widely spoken in Greece and it is highly improbable that she/he could have learned it in Greece. But when she/he is seen (by others) speaking Russian in the public space and (as is common for male FSU Greeks) drinking beer with friends in the street, he/she is then labelled Russo-Pontic or simply Russian. The process of selective exclusion is illustrated clearly in the following account.

Maria, my neighbour during my first stay in Nikopoli, had a rather positive image about the FSU Greeks living in the immediate surroundings of her house. She had told me she has no complaints about any of her neighbours and that people are very friendly towards her. One day I met her by coincidence at an internet café situated very close to her house. She told me she was facing some problems with her internet connection. I offered to help her. When we went to her place she told me in a very upset manner:

The situation with the internet connection has caused me a lot of problems. I have to go and give my money to the Russians. I do not want to go there. I do not feel safe. Last night I was there and somebody came with an angry face. He told me to leave the computer I was using because he wanted to chat with his girlfriend.

Her 'good FSU Greek immigrant neighbours' had turned into 'Russians', or more precisely the misbehaving FSU Greeks had turned to Russian so as not harm her positive self-image about Greeks.

Similarly, Vasilis used the category of 'false Greeks' to defend his FSU Greek neighbours. Like Maria he was among the minority of natives who favoured the immigrants in Nikopoli. Owning a business in a rather central location of new Nikopoli brought him in daily contact with many residents. He was negative about the native residents in old Nikopoli. In his view they are very closed and extremely prejudiced towards their FSU Greeks neighbours whom he described as *philótimi*, helpful and honest people. He went on to explain to me that the rare negative behaviours, for which the whole immigrant community is criticized, are in fact perpetrated by the 'false Greeks'. I expressed my confusion about those 'false Greeks'. I told him that everybody is speaking about them but I had not met any, and I asked him whether he had. Vasilis replied positively, but the person he named was one whom he had just described as 'among the nicest guys in the neighbourhood'. In certain cases the process of selective exclusion led my informants into inconsistencies and contradictions. However, these were not sufficient to challenge the ideologies of Greekness that framed their perceptions of the immigrants in the neighbourhood. In the mindset of the majority of native residents, the 'false Greeks' were the bad immigrants and the 'real Greeks' the good ones.

The double frame of reference in the FSU Greek reception

As mentioned in the fifth chapter, a large share of the native population in Nikopoli are descendants of the 1920s refugees. The Greekness of their violently

uprooted ancestors was also challenged at the time of their settlement. The influx of a vast population in a desperate condition during and after the ‘Asia Minor catastrophe’ aggravated the already harsh socio-economic condition of the local Greeks. The compassion with which the natives initially welcomed the refugees soon turned to open rejection and hostility. The nativist ire focused on the refugees’ distinct cultural and linguistic features. People from the native population called the refugees ‘Turkish seed’ (τουρκόσποροι), baptized in yogurt (γιαουρτοβαφτισμένοι),¹⁷⁴ and ‘Turkish born’ (τουρκομερίτες) (Mavrokordatos 1983). According to Mavrokordatos (1983) the native-refugee division in the interwar period should be treated as an ethnic one.

Hirschon (1989) points our attention to the internal regional divisions of the 1920s refugee population. She makes reference to four categories: the refugees from the Ionian coast, those from Constantinople, the Pontic refugees, and the refugees from the interior of Asia Minor. Within the refugee community, distinct stereotypes were employed for each of those four groups. For instance, the characterization ‘born in Turkey’ was reserved for those from the interior of Anatolia. No ethnographic research has been done on the interaction between the refugees and the natives, and therefore the significance of the internal division of the refugee community in their interactions with the native society is not recorded. Since the regional internal division of the refugee population was familiar to the native population, one may hypothesize that the ethnic slurs mentioned by Mavrokordatos were not addressed at the entire refugee population.¹⁷⁵ Possibly, the distinct language of the refugees from the interior of Asia Minor, and to a lesser degree that of the Pontics,¹⁷⁶ made them more vulnerable to attacks on their national identity. According to my research in Nikopoli, the native population does not make any distinction for the FSU Greeks in terms of the immigrants’ origins. That possibly marks a difference between the reception of the FSU Greeks and the 1920s refugees.

Moreover, the reception of the FSU Greeks and the 1920s refugees is clearly distinct in that the abusive epithets used for the latter do not express a complete denial of their Greekness, but rather a doubt about their cultural and racial purity. A complete denial of the refugees’ Greekness would have been in any case very difficult for the natives to maintain, given the context of their uprooting. The context of reception of the FSU Greeks who immigrated after 1990 was

¹⁷⁴ On account of refugees’ fondness for yoghurt, a characteristic of Turkish cuisine.

¹⁷⁵ Possibly, attacks on their Greekness were not addressed at all to Constantinopolitan Greeks, due to the symbolic significance of the city for the Greek national narrative.

¹⁷⁶ The vast majority of the Greeks from the interior of Asia minor were Turkish-speaking. The majority of Pontics spoke the Greek Pontic dialect and a considerable segment spoke Turkish.

substantially different. The FSU Greek 'return' took place together with the mass undocumented immigration of the 1990s. The natives, including the descendants of the refugees, re-conceptualized their country not only as a refuge for the community of Greek descent, but also as a desired destination for non-Greek nationals. Unable or not willing to differentiate between Greek and non-Greek FSU immigrants, natives thought of a large segment of the FSU Greek population as imposters unjustly benefiting from the state provisions by passing as Greeks. The non-Greek immigrants from the former Soviet Union (i.e. Georgians, Russians, Armenians) constitute a negative frame of reference for FSU Greeks. When FSU Greeks do not meet the expectations of the native Greeks they are represented as 'false Greeks' and lumped together with them in the category of Russians and Russo-Pontics. Although the 1920s refugees were distinguished in terms of their regional origin, the FSU Greeks are caught in an arbitrary distinction between real and false Greeks.

The importance of the migration context is also highlighted by the different way that native Greeks saw the 1960s Soviet Greek immigrants (see chapter 5.2, pp. 102-107). Although in Nikopoli native residents initially called them Russians in a derogatory way and denigrated them for 'their cultural differences', they did not doubt their Greekness. Why would one immigrate to Greece, a poor country at that time, if one was not Greek?¹⁷⁷

Contrary to this, however, native Greeks expect the post-1990s FSU Greeks to prove their Greekness against a background of a general distrust. If FSU Greeks manage to do this, they are then placed within a long national history of the co-ethnic migrations and refugee inflows that shaped the contemporary Greek state. Natives positively relate them to the 1920s refugees,¹⁷⁸ who constitute a positive frame of reference for them. It is in this context that native Greeks' characterization of FSU Greeks as refugees is meaningful (see Voutira, 2003a; 2003b).

Now, however, after almost a century, the conflictual experience of the settlement of the 1920s refugees is forgotten. The official re-narration of history, according to which the skilful 1920s refugees managed despite all odds to tame their fates and inject new blood into the old Greece (Giannakopoulos, 1992), is hard to compete with. How do FSU Greeks formulate their FSU background in such a constraining reception context? Are they aware of the denial of their Greekness by the natives and how do they respond? How do they speak about the 'false

¹⁷⁷ An important factor in accepting the 1960 FSU Greeks as real Greeks would also have been that the majority of the 1960s FSU Greeks spoke Pontic.

¹⁷⁸ It is in that context that the characterization of FSU Greeks as refugees is meaningful.

Greeks' category? To answer these questions, in the remainder of this subchapter I will look into the ways FSU Greeks present and negotiate their Greekness and their position in Greek society.

FSU Greeks and the Greek state

In our discussions, FSU Greeks were very open and did not paint a rosy image of their experiences in Greece. Most had complaints about their socio-economic situation, and they were frustrated with the Greek state which they described as inefficient, corrupt, and unsupportive of their community. The phrase 'my main problem is with the state rather than with the people' was echoed by several of my informants.

Interestingly, the state was claimed by both native and FSU Greeks to be the main generator of the problems discussed. On the one hand, native Greeks consider that it unjustly favours 'false FSU Greeks' who in their perspective have managed in large numbers to pass as FSU Greeks. On the other hand, FSU Greeks considered it responsible for their vulnerable socio-economic position in Greece. The inability of the highly educated FSU Greeks to find jobs that matched their qualifications was an experience that acquired symbolic significance within the FSU Greek community. Several FSU Greeks referred to it as a proof of the exploitation FSU Greeks are facing in 'the fatherland'.

FSU Greek people I spoke to compared their situation with the FSU Jews and FSU Germans, who in their view were more easily able to make a living after migration to Israel and Germany respectively. They told me that those two countries, especially the former, had well-organized reception plans that provided support to newcomers. They contrasted these to the state-initiated settlement plan in Thrace, of which they were very critical. Their criticism focused on the state authorities' choice of the border area and their inability to deliver what they had promised. They further claimed that the Greek state profited by misappropriating EU funds, which were intended to benefit them. Ippolit's words about his experience working as a street vendor¹⁷⁹ are indicative of the bitterness with which several FSU Greeks spoke about the Greek state.

That was the absolute embarrassment [*η απόλυτη ξεφτίλα*], we had to sell our things in the streets to get some money. I spend nights in the street to reserve our place in the open market for the coming day. I was a young

¹⁷⁹ For this practice see chapter 4, pp. 84

guy at that time, how can you expect me to manage my studies? This is the help we got from the Greeks and the Greek State.

The FSU Greek priest of the 'Russian church' also blamed the state for the negative image FSU Greeks have acquired in Greece. He proposed that it ought to have launched a media campaign to present diversity as an enrichment of society rather than a threat. He told me that it could also have capitalized on peoples' expertise stemming from their FSU education in a way that would both have helped upgrade their socio-economic position and enhance their public image. He referred, for instance, to education on classical dance and music, which in his opinion is underdeveloped in Greece and in which many FSU Greeks are specialized. He said that the state could have opened an art academy with FSU Greek teachers and have promoted it as an FSU Greek academy.

Only two of the FSU Greeks I met in Nikopoli were positive about the Greek state. Giouras and Nikitas claimed that the Greek state as well as the local authorities are doing their utmost to support the FSU Greeks. Those two people also represented the relationship between FSU and native Greeks in a much more positive manner than the rest of my informants. Giouras is an FSU Greek in his fifties who was paid to undertake bureaucratic work for other FSU Greeks. He also acted as an informal mediator between the local community in Efxinoupoli and the Municipality of Efkarpia. Nikitas is a convenience store owner of approximately the same age. Giouras and Nikitas emigrated at the end of the 1980s from Kazakhstan; they are both of Pontic origin and speakers of the Pontic dialect.

Giouras's more positive attitude could be related to his status of a 'cultural broker' (Wolf, 1956) ; possibly, he communicated a positive image of both groups due to his mediating role between the FSU Greek residents in Efxinoupoli and the local authorities.¹⁸⁰ Nikitas was a more idiosyncratic case. In fact, his

¹⁸⁰ I attempted to assess whether such a discourse was generally embraced by people involved in institutions that aim to facilitate inter-group communication or deal with the formal presentation of the community. In so doing I had to leave the neighbourhood space since no such institutions exist in Nikopoli. I spoke to five people, four of whom were engaged in a cultural association, and an FSU Greek employee in the Centre for the Study and Development of the Hellenic Culture of the Black Sea. Although, officially, numerous FSU Greek associations exist in Thessaloniki, it was difficult to get in contact with them. At the time of my research they were inactive or did not have visiting offices. My tentative findings, based on a very restricted number of people, suggest that the people involved with such institutions were not necessarily more positive about the state and its reception of FSU Greeks. Only one of my interviewees stated - immediately after I introduced myself - that he was not willing to reproduce a discourse about the difficulties and troubles which in his view prevailed among the FSU community. He told me he found such discussions

discourse serves as a nice example to illustrate how my informants *did not* speak. Once we were talking in his store when his friend, Konstantin, came to invite him to play cards. Nikitas has a small room next to the convenience store where friends gather to chat, play, and drink. We went there all together and continued our discussion. Nikitas introduced me to Konstantin. He was very enthusiastic about my project and very eager to add to the discussion:

Nikitas: [...] not all of deportees eventually returned to Abkhazia. Some stayed in Kazakhstan. They had built their houses, their children had married there. Other had built up fortunes [κάνανε περιουσίες]. Kazakhstan is a big country, more than three times Greece.

Konstantin: No, much bigger. It is three and a half times bigger than France so imagine it in relation to Greece. In order to cross the country you need more than two days.

Nikitas: Yes, ok that's true it was the biggest country in the former Soviet Union after Russia.

Konstantin: Of course, since it reaches up to Afghanistan, it's not only big but it has resources, mines, uranium – do you know how valuable uranium is ... like gold.

Nikitas: Yes, ok!

Konstantin: In that country there is also lake Aral. It was a huge lake. Then two rivers that fed it were redirected and the lake started shrinking. Do you know how many boats were stranded on the land?

Nikitas (in an upset manner): Manolis does not care about the history of Kazakhstan. You should tell him about the Pontics [referring to the FSU Greeks].

Me: No, those issues are really interesting too as they concern the history of FSU Greeks as well.

Nikitas: Yes, but what he tells you, you can open a book and read it, but the story of the Pontics is something we know from personal experience [ζήσαμε στο περσί μας].

Konstantin changed the subject and started narrating stories about the expulsion of Greeks to Kazakhstan. He told me that when the deportees were being transferred to Kazakhstan, at one point they started playing songs with the *kemenche*, the Pontic lyre. The Russian soldiers told them to not sing in Greek, so they started singing in Russian. He sung the song to me. Nikitas intervened again and told him to say the lyrics in Greek so that I understand. Later, another friend of Nikitas came and reminded him that they had to leave. Before leaving,

unfruitful. To make sure we would not be discussing such issues he asked me to submit to him on paper the questions I wanted to pose.

Nikitas stressed once more to Konstantin that he should tell me stories of the Pontics and not about Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Soviet Union.

Unlike Konstantin, who was rather obedient to his censures, others were not. They teased or simply ignored him. Another time, when a friend of his, Pavlos, narrated in bitter tones his extremely negative experiences with lawyers, construction companies, and property owners, which he had undergone in his attempt to build his house, Nikitas reconsidered his positive opinion about the Greek state. Pavlos had bought an apartment in a house that was under construction. He did not pay the full amount. According to the agreement he made with the seller, he would work in the construction of the house in exchange for the remaining amount he had to pay for his apartment. When the house was built his apartment was sold to another person. Pavlos did not have official papers for his purchase. After many years in the court, Pavlos lost the case. As well as losing all his savings, Pavlos also developed serious health problems resulting from personal stress. He told me that his migration to Greece was his worst lifetime decision. Nikitas did not challenge him. He turned to me and told me 'You see? That is the help we get here from the Greek state.'

Greece and Russia in the discourse of FSU Greeks

During an interview with an elderly couple at their house in Efxinoupoli, the wife asked me, 'Why do you Greeks do not like the Russians?'¹⁸¹ Her husband intervened to tell her that native Greeks side with the Americans and that's why they do not like Russians. Her question was not meant to be confrontational, but expressed a deep wonder. I asked her why she thought this, and she told me 'because Greeks are speaking negatively about Russians'. The negative comments which the old woman had heard or heard other FSU Greeks complaining about, probably did not concern native Greeks' images of Russia and Russians in Russia. The latter is generally positive, in contrast to dominant negative discourse about the USA and Americans (see Stephanidis, 2007). The comments in question

¹⁸¹ The views of FSU Greeks about Russians were generally neutral to positive whereas they were polarized for different peoples of the Caucasus. According to my fieldwork data they depended to a large extent on the particular area from which FSU Greeks originated. For instance, people from Tsalka and Abkhazia were extremely anti-Georgian and more positive about Armenians. Greeks from Opret, a village to the south-west of the city of Marneouli, as well as people who lived in big cities, had more positive attitudes about both Georgians and Armenians. Finally, as it would be expected, people of mixed origin were favourable towards their non-Greek ethnic peers. It is also interesting to note that several national stereotypes that were employed in FSU, such as 'the cunning Armenian', 'the lazy Georgian' and 'the naïf Russian', were also used in Greece. They were not only addressed to immigrants from those countries but also to FSU Greeks of mixed backgrounds.

most probably targeted the category of ‘Russian immigrants’, which, as explained earlier, is a generic stereotypical negative label used for the FSU immigrants.

When I started my fieldwork I expected that in their encounters with natives, FSU Greeks would attempt to build upon their common Greek descent. In that context, I anticipated that they would try to downplay those aspects of their identity that mark a difference between them and native Greeks, as recorded by Veikou (2001) for Greek Albanians. My field experience did not confirm my hypothesis. Just like Konstantin was quoted earlier, many people I spoke to told me stories or gave me information about the republics where they had lived before. They were eager to share with me their experiences in the Soviet Union. The fact that I have travelled to Russia was highly valued by the majority of my FSU Greek informants, as was the fact that during my second fieldtrip I could understand and speak some very basic Russian.

FSU Greeks are not secretive about the Russian influence in their upbringing. In my focus group at the ‘Russian church’, I asked the participants which aspects of their lives in the FSU they wished to preserve in Greece. An FSU Greek woman in her 50s replied ‘our language’, with reference to Russian, and the rest of the group intervened to say that this would happen in any case since they mostly speak in Russian in their daily life. The participants in the focus group were regular followers of the service in the ‘Russian church’. In our previous discussions, some of them spoke to me about their love for Russian culture. Their responses to my question might indicate to a certain extent their attachment to Russian culture. Yet it was also indicative of a more general trend among the FSU Greek community. As mentioned, the majority of first-generation FSU Greek immigrants speak Russian among each other. With the exceptions of Giouras and Nikitas, who insisted on replying in Greek to their friends when I was present, people switched to Greek only when they wished to include me in their discussion.

A large segment of my respondents presented the Soviet education system as superior to the Greek. They also took pride in the rich Russian culture and cherished the state support for art and its popularity among people in the former Soviet Union. Stefanos, who had studied fine arts in the former Soviet Union, told me ‘there is no national fine arts tradition in Greece... here you only have *Bouzoukia*’¹⁸². He further told me that a fine arts school close to his hometown in

¹⁸² The bouzouki is a Greek popular musical instrument. The word *bouzoukia*, the plural form of bouzouki, is also used to refer to the entertainment nightclubs where live contemporary Greek music is performed.

Russia had been founded by an FSU Greek. He implied that FSU Greeks could progress in FSU despite their minority status, but not in Greece.

Similarly to Stefanos, a number of FSU Greeks evoked a symbolically intriguing 'we'/'you' distinction between themselves, as related to a nation that is in effect a superpower, and natives in Greece. They spoke with admiration of the technological advancements achieved by the Soviet regime and the political influence of present-day Russia. Without underplaying their Greekness, they selectively referred to their experience as subjects in the former Soviet Union as a source of pride and a means to challenge the denigrating attitudes of native Greeks (see also Voutira, 2006). Rather than building on their common national descent, they asserted their difference from native Greeks to support their superiority. Although immigration signified downwards mobility for most FSU Greeks, placing them on the lower ranks of the Greek socio-economic ladder, feelings of superiority to native Greeks were widespread in their community.¹⁸³

Several of my informants tried to bridge the Russian and the Greek aspects of their identity which had been made to seem incompatible by the denigrating discourse by Greeks about 'the Russians'. They did so by highlighting the commonalities between the two nations. They referred to the common religion and the role of Cyril and Methodius in developing the Russian script. Those who were more proud of their Greekness claimed that Russia owes almost everything to Greece and bitterly regretted the fact that present-day Greece has lost its cultural influence. Stefanos told me:

Why for so many years there has been no development in Greece? Because Greeks are only looking at the past and do nothing for the present. I was speaking to a Greek guy, explaining to him 'Ok the Greeks did many things in the past but what will remain from contemporary Greeks? Only the advertisements. I did not expect Greece to be like that. Everyone wants to step on the other. You should not stand out. They will help you but if you stand out they will trip you up.

In chapter 3, I described how in areas without compact Greek populations and in urban centres in the former Soviet Union the ethnic identity of Greeks was largely stripped of its cultural aspect and was based on images of classical Greece transmitted through state education. One of my informants had immigrated to Greece for study reasons after winning a scholarship that was provided to high

¹⁸³ In that there is a similarity between them and the 1920s Minor Asia refugees who also presented their identity as superior to that of native Greeks. For the 1920s Minor Asia refugees case (see Hirschon 1989).

school graduates of Greek descent in the former Soviet Union. He told me that his images of Greece collided with his experiences when he came to Greece.

I had no idea what I would encounter in Greece. The image I had about Greece was based on my knowledge about ancient Greece. Now, if I leave Greece I will have a twofold perception. On the one hand, I will still think of Greece like I used to do in Russia,¹⁸⁴ through the history of ancient Greece but also Byzantium, the Greek revolution, and the Greek community in Russia. On the other hand, I will think of it according to my experiences here; a country with relaxed rhythms, which usually annoy me, smiling people and also cunning people, cunning not necessarily in a negative sense.

Other FSU Greeks told me that they expected to meet people like Socrates, Plato, or Leonidas, and were disappointed by their first-hand impressions of contemporary Greece.

Life in Greece was considered stressful and competitive, especially by those who immigrated early and did not have extended experiences of the post-Soviet era. People were also critical of interpersonal relations in Greece. They missed the unselfishness which they felt characterized interpersonal relations in their previous homelands; friendships in Greece were described as instrumental and superficial. Many FSU Greeks also lamented the deterioration of interpersonal relations within their community after migration. They felt that jealousy and competitiveness had become prominent within their community.¹⁸⁵

FSU Greeks' criticism of social life in Greece also concerned the behaviour of the youth towards adults, which was thought of as disrespectful and impolite. They focused especially on parent-child relationships and claimed that the upbringing of children was generally better 'there'. People originating from urban centres focused on the quality of state education. People from villages focused more on traditional values transmitted through family. Especially the elderly from closed communities were critical of the excessive freedom they felt was provided to teenagers in Greece. They commented negatively on the fact that they stay out in the streets until late, that many of them smoke, and that couples kiss in public spaces. Among people from the villages, views were less uniform on gender

¹⁸⁴ Several FSU Greeks referred to the former Soviet Union and the successor states as Russia.

¹⁸⁵ Others, however, presented the in-group jealousy as a characteristic of Greek communities also in the Soviet Union. They contrasted the FSU Greek community to the Jewish and the Armenian ones which they described as more solidarist. In-group competitiveness was presented by them as a common negative trait of Greeks worldwide.

relations. Some people favoured what they perceived as more equal relations between men and women in Greece while others complained that native Greek men were too soft and women too emancipated.

Comparing Russia to Greece, FSU Greeks did not always favour their former country. They cherished many aspects of their lives in Greece, most prominently the sense of security they told me they feel in their new homeland. They told me that human life is more valued in Greece and that people are more caring. They described social life in Greece as less violent and levels of criminality substantially lower in relation to Russia. Many of my informants also positively commented on the leisurely pace of life in Greece, saying that Greeks 'do not drink too much and that they know how to have fun'. Others valued the fact that the Greek state is less authoritarian and that you can demonstrate and protest for your rights. The state was also considered to be less corrupt, and a few of my informants told me that although the Greek welfare state is weak, it at least provides its citizens with some basic support, which is lacking in the Soviet successor states.

Several FSU Greeks criticized people from their own community as well as non-Greek immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are overly negative about Greece and Greeks. Their criticism of other FSU Greeks expressed a division in perceptions about the strategies and presentation of their group. Many FSU Greeks accused their ethnic peers of complaining too much and being socially closed. They considered this an attitude that does not help them to progress in life and which harms their collective image (cf. chapter 6.1, pp. 143). Their criticism of non-Greek immigrants was different. It was voiced from the standpoint of the Greek as towards a foreigner. When I first heard one of my FSU Greek contacts in Nikopoli blaming some of his Russian friends for being too proud and ungrateful, I was surprised. Due to the focus of my research on their relationship with other native Greeks I had lost sight of their twofold belonging: while their origin in the former Soviet Union marked the boundary between them and native Greeks, their belongingness to the Greek nation delimited their relation to the non-Greek FSU immigrants. Hence, while they defended their Soviet background to Greeks, they also defended Greece and Greeks to non-Greek immigrants.

Rejecting the Russo-Pontic and the Russian label

The majority of FSU Greeks will not leave it unchallenged if they are called Russo-Pontic; they prefer, and demand, to be called Pontic or Greek instead. This is known to most native Greeks, who generally avoid addressing them as Russo-Pontics, in order to avoid confrontation. Many times, I heard my FSU Greek

informants claiming that ‘Russo-Pontics do not exist; only Pontics¹⁸⁶ and Russians do’. This is not accurate in that there are a number of FSU Greeks of mixed Russian and Pontic origin; as might be expected, those are more positive about the the Russo-Pontic label. Moreover, the literal meaning of the word ‘Russo-Pontic’ need not only be interpreted as indicating a person of mixed origin, but also as signifying a Pontic Greek from Russia or a Pontic Greek partaking of Russian culture.

Taking into account that most FSU Greeks acknowledge a Russian and/or Soviet influence in their culture and that they are proud of their difference from the rest of the Greeks, their fierce rejection of the Russo-Pontic label at first sight appears puzzling. As was also explained to me by the priest of the ‘Russian church’, who was among the minority of FSU Greeks who did not oppose the label, there is nothing inherently negative in the word itself.

I have no problem with the word ‘Russo-Pontic’. It is a word that indicates our Pontic descent and the fact that we emigrated from the former Soviet Union. Besides, we do have satellite televisions for watching Russian programs, we listen to Russian music, and we read Russian press; it is simply a name, I do not see why it should be seen as a negative word.

However, the reason why FSU Greeks do not accept the Russo-Pontic label does not concern the literal meaning of the word. They reject it because it has emerged as a stigmatizing/pejorative term.

The emergence of this label as a stigmatizing term points to the existence of a negative public discourse about FSU Greeks that has developed in parallel with and contrary to media and political representations of this same group of people.¹⁸⁷ Why and how has such a discourse developed? Although this question goes beyond the framework of my research, a few remarks can be made here. Given that the discourse on Russo-Pontics did not figure in the national press and television, it was not regularized and typified at the national level. The

¹⁸⁶ Analogously, those who rejected the Pontic identity (see chapter 7.2), claimed that only Greeks and Russians exist.

¹⁸⁷ Indeed, the case of Nikopoli hints that the contrast is perceived as such more by the analyst than the people themselves. In the mindset of the majority of the native Greeks in Nikopol there was a clear division between the ‘false’ and the ‘true Greeks’. Their perceptions of the ‘true FSU Greeks’ were in accordance with the positive official discourse. Yet the fact remains: FSU Greeks were positively framed by politicians and media and at the same time thought of and discussed about in a negative way by native Greeks, at least in Thessaloniki.

content of this discourse differs from place to place and is not equally intense in all places at any given time.

For instance, an FSU Greek informant of mine told me that natives in the Peloponnese, where he worked when he first came to Greece, were positively predisposed towards FSU Greeks. He contrasted their attitude to that of natives in Thessaloniki, implying that native Greeks in the Peloponnese do not speak about FSU Greeks in the way that people from Thessaloniki do. It is worth noting that the Peloponnese has a limited number of FSU Greek immigrants. Similarly, Sakis, a native Greek doctor from Athens who did his studies in Thessaloniki, told me that he developed an idea of 'the Russo-Pontic' when he moved to Thessaloniki. I met Sakis outside the context of my research. When he learned the subject of my PhD he told me 'Very interesting. But really tell me, who are those FSU Greeks after all? Because you know... when one speaks of Russo-Pontics in Thessaloniki you think of mafia or something.'

In Thessaloniki a negative discourse on the Russo-Pontics seems to be quite widespread, possibly connected to the overrepresentation of FSU Greeks there. We may enquire into the reasons why such a negative discourse has developed by looking at its local articulations in a place such as in Nikopoli. In the previous chapter I provided evidence regarding how the native Greeks residents of Nikopoli negatively assessed 'the cultural difference' of FSU Greeks and 'their behaviour'. Encounters similar to those in Nikopoli would most probably have given rise to the stereotype of the Russo-Pontic. Yet it would be too simplistic to consider that the general discussion in Thessaloniki about FSU Greeks is an aggregation and a result of different local discourses on them. It is more than that. From the moment an image of a group of people coalesces, however vaguely, opinions of and experiences with 'this group of people' are explained in relation to this image.

Moreover, such an image is not only shaped through the experience of living together. It is fed by different flows of information that are used to assess such experiences and support pre-existing opinions. For instance, media references to the 'illegal hellenizations' (see chapter 4.2, pp. 89-91) mediated native Greeks' perceptions of FSU Greeks and intensified their suspicions of their supposed false Greekness. Furthermore, the official discourse on FSU Greeks might have been positive, yet the framing of migration in general and of non-Greek migration from the former Soviet Union in particular was not. Given that many native Greeks denied the Greekness of FSU Greeks, their negative views of them were related to broader discussions about a supposed 'invasion of immigrants to Greece'. It is in that context that several native Greeks accused immigrants of

‘taking the jobs of native Greeks’ and ‘threatening the social order of the country’ with their alleged engagement in criminal activities.

The native Greeks in Nikopoli not only contributed to a negative discussion about FSU Greeks in the city of Thessaloniki, but were also influenced by it. Their assessment of their FSU Greek neighbours was mediated by a diffused negative public opinion of the Russo-Pontics. It has been shown that the image of the FSU Greeks in Nikopoli as aggressive people was strong, sustained, and augmented through gossip and the spread of rumours. This image impeded contact between the two communities, since native Greeks expected FSU Greeks to react aggressively for the slightest reason. They also believed that a considerable segment of them engage in criminal activities, and several of my native contacts told me that they feel insecure in the neighbourhood.

The Russo-Pontic label not only includes the stereotype of FSU immigrants as aggressive and prone to criminality. As described earlier, depending on the context in which it is used it also expresses the latent doubt of native Greeks about the true Greek origin of FSU Greeks. It is also for that reason that they ask to be called simply Pontic or Greeks instead. Several of my informants got very emotional in describing how they feel when Greeks doubt their Greekness; as one of them said, it is ‘like being hit with a rock in the heart’. They told me that the reasons why natives deny their Greekness has to do with historical ignorance. Many FSU Greeks told me that in Greece people do not know their history, while people in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere abroad recognize them as Greeks because people are more informed about their past. This explanation was commonly accompanied by comments about native Greeks being uneducated.

The issue of class in FSU-native Greek relations

Finally, the Russo-Pontic label indicates a low class standing. For most native Greeks ‘the Russo-Pontic’ is an uncivilized, uneducated, and poor person. The fact that the educational level of FSU Greeks in Thessaloniki is on average similar to or even slightly higher than that of the local native Greek population (see Labrianidis et al. 2008) is not widely known by native Greeks. Since the vast majority of FSU Greeks are employed in manual unskilled jobs, natives think of them as people with low education. The class aspect in the interaction between native and FSU Greeks did not emerge as a central one in my research in Nikopoli due to the fact that the majority of immigrant and native residents share a common working-class background. According to the data of the GEITONIES survey, FSU and native Greeks are employed in similar, mostly low-status

occupations, the only difference being that more native Greek are employed in the public sector.

There are differences in educational levels, however, with a considerably larger segment of the native Greek population, mostly elderly people, having not finished their primary education (18% in comparison to 2%) and more FSU Greeks having concluded university education, in comparison to natives in Nikopoli (30% and 16% respectively). Approximately half of both native and immigrants have finished their upper secondary education or have followed post-secondary non-tertiary education. To my question as to whether he has friends in Nikopoli, Aggelos, my neighbour during my first stay in Nikopoli, told me:

I have no contacts here. All my friends live in the centre. I will go there now and again, to go out, to play backgammon [να παίξω κανονα ταβλάκι]. Here it is... mostly Georgian-Russo-Pontics live here [εδώ όλο Γεωργιανο Ρωσοπόντιους έχει]. It is not easy to come together with them, it is not possible in fact, uneducated people, uncultivated they are more close to Turkey. Georgia, if you have a look at the map, is very close to Turkey, it could have been part of the former Soviet Union but they did not have much of a relationship with them. They speed through the neighbourhood in their cars. The other day one nearly hit me and the worst is that they also want to have the last word [Και το χειρότερο είναι ότι ζητάνε και τα ρέστα μετά από πάνω].

Aggelos, who has a basic education and works as a factory worker, appealed to culture to legitimize his view of FSU Greeks in Nikopoli as uneducated people. He argued that the quality of a person is not so much about education per se but about being cultivated, civilized; something which in his view the local FSU Greeks are not. He associated their culture with Turkey which, in line with dominant nationalistic Greek narratives, he denigrated as an uncivilized country.

The issue of education and the class background of Nikopoli's residents was raised a few times by local FSU Greeks, too. They described native Greeks in Nikopoli in a rather positive manner, as simple non-pretentious people of a working-class background. At the same time they also expressed a feeling of collective superiority due to their higher levels of education. Most commonly, however, FSU Greeks raised the issue of class in relation to their position in Greek society in large. The priest told me:

Our people [referring to FSU Greeks] climbed down the social ladder due to migration and in the eyes of the natives are people of no worth... and

you know that in the Soviet Union there were no class distinctions. This made this experience more painful. But things got better for the majority, people have their own house, a job... they are not poor like the majority of natives think. The other day they were distributing food in Efxinoupoli as if people were starving here...

Several of my informants highlighted that Greeks would not call an American of Pontic descent Americano-Pontic but rather 'a Greek from the USA'; similarly, they should be called Pontics or Greeks from Russia. They claimed that the reason behind this distinction is that Greeks from the USA are thought of as rich, and Greeks from the Soviet Union as poor.

The negative attitude of my educated and affluent Russian (non-Greek) immigrant informants against the 'Russo-Pontics' was also indicative of the negative class connotations of the Russo-Pontic label. The Russian immigrants used the term to refer to the lower-educated FSU Greeks, mostly originating from rural areas, whom they depicted as conservative and self-excluding. They claimed that the Russo-Pontics have marginal or no relation at all to Russian culture and that their Russian language skills are also poor. They further told me that they do not mix with them in everyday life. Their attempt to dissociate from them relates to their belief that 'the Russo-Pontics' give a bad name to the Russian immigrants and spoil their identity.

A Russian man in his late twenties who could physically pass as a Greek told me: 'Yes, I know that I do not look like a Russian... I have to 'fight' to not pass as a Russo-Pontic'. He and others of my informants confidently present themselves as Russians in their interactions with natives. In their case the word 'Russian' is not heard as stigmatizing. They told me they have not faced any racism, and they criticized the FSU Greeks for the bad name they have acquired.

The word 'Russian', however, has a completely different meaning when addressed to an FSU Greek by natives. Calling an FSU Greek 'Russian' has the same negative connotations as that of 'Russo-Pontic', though expressed in a more acute way. Yuri told me that an FSU Greek friend of his felt insulted when she was called Russian. Yuri, who is of mixed Russian and Greek origin, told her he could not understand why being called Russian could be taken as an insult and confessed to me that he was a bit offended by her words. His friend, who does not look like a Russian, told him that if she was called Russian because of her blue eyes she would not be offended; but she explained that calling her a 'Russian' was essentially a way to denigrate and insult her. Similarly, the priest told me that many natives call FSU Greeks 'Russians', implying that they are people without capabilities. He also told me that they insult them for watching

Russian television and speaking Russian, which has led to some of them avoiding contact with natives, developing inferiority complexes, and being ashamed to speak their mother tongue.

Interestingly, however, at the time of my research a limited number of FSU Greeks who enjoyed a better socio-economic position told me they had started using the word 'Russo-Pontic' occasionally as an identification label. Kleanthis is a lawyer who worked during his first years in Greece as a builder. One day during that period, a man passed by their construction site and asked him and his colleagues whether they were Russo-Pontic. Kleanthis became furious at having this rather chubby man emerge from a Mercedes and insult him. He started swearing at him aggressively. The man told him to calm down, and explained to him in poor Russian that he was also a Russo-Pontic. He was a descendent of Pontic refugees who arrived in Greece from Russia during the 1920. He told him that he, Kleanthis, would one day also call himself a Russo-Pontic. Kleanthis, who now enjoys a better socio-economic position, has indeed presented himself as a Russo-Pontic a few times. He told me he finds it funny how native people take a defensive and apologetic stance when he replies to their question about his origin that he is a Russo-Pontic. I was told a very similar story by Galina who is a highly educated FSU woman working in the secondary education in Greece.¹⁸⁸

FSU Greeks and the 'False Greeks'

Native residents' discourse on the 'false Greeks' was based on rumours and arbitrary judgments derived from FSU Greeks' public behaviour. Given the FSU Greeks' personal experiences of the process of acquisition of *homogenís* status and Greek citizenship, I had assumed that they would have more concrete knowledge about whether any fraud had taken place and if so to what extent. Responding to my questions, rather than raising this issue themselves, most of my FSU Greek informants claimed that non-Greek FSU immigrants have indeed managed to pass as Greeks and access the privileged *homogenís* status. As to whether that was a widespread practice they were divided; to my surprise, a considerable segment thought that this was indeed the case.

My discussion with Alina, an FSU Greek in her early thirties, is indicative of the information I commonly got from those FSU Greeks who thought that access to *homogenís* status by non-Greek FSU immigrants was widespread:

¹⁸⁸ Earlier it was mentioned that the priest argued that the term 'Russo-Pontic' should not be seen as negative. Given the respect he was afforded due to his profession, he might not have experienced it as a stigmatizing term, or perhaps much less so than other FSU Greeks.

Me: I was told that there are people who accessed the *homogenís* status without being of Greek origin. Do you think that this has happened??

Alina: Of course there are many such people.

Me: Really? I have not met anyone so far.

Alina: Well, I am not surprised; they wouldn't introduce themselves to you. In fact I do not know anyone either.

Me: So, how do you know about them?

Alina: People can understand. For example, when immigrants who are known not to be Greeks by their co-villagers in the former Soviet Union acquire houses in Greece, people suspect that they have managed to do so through the state loans that are given to *homogenís*. It is almost impossible for a non-Greek immigrant to get a bank loan [...].

Me: Native residents in Nikopoli to whom I spoke told me that the majority of immigrants in their neighbourhood are 'false Greeks'. Do you think this is the case?

Alina: Well, no. The natives are mentioning something that is true when they speak about false ones, but they are proving it with false evidence. If a person does not speak Pontic it does not mean that she/he is not Greek, like natives think. As you know, some Greeks from Georgia have been speaking Turkish for example

Similarly to Alina, most of the FSU Greeks I asked did not personally know 'false Greeks'.¹⁸⁹ Those who agreed that access to the *homogenís* status by non-Greek FSU immigrants was widespread commonly relied on rumours, just like native Greeks. This made them suspicious of other FSU Greeks in their encounters.

Alina was born in Georgia to an Armenian-Russian father and a Greek-Ukrainian mother. When I asked her how she identifies ethnically she told me that she primarily relates to her Russian background due to the Russian education she had acquired. She later corrected herself, saying that she would describe herself more precisely as a Soviet person. Although she had not lived for an extended period in the Soviet Union she related better to this overarching identity because it included the diversity of her ethnic background. On another occasion, when an FSU Greek asked her about her descent Alina described herself as Greek-Armenian. She had earlier told me that her surname is Armenian and as a result people from the former Soviet Union recognize her as Armenian. Being

¹⁸⁹ Those who did commonly showed understanding towards them; they told me that acquiring the *homogenís* status by forging documents that presented them as Greeks was the only way some people could escape the war or a very precarious socio-economic situation.

unfamiliar with Armenian culture and not speaking Armenian, she told me she does not really feel Armenian.

Alina immigrated to Greece to study, without her family, and had less extensive relations with other FSU Greek immigrants compared to most FSU Greek people. Her mixed background and her limited relations with other FSU Greeks made her a target of suspicion with respect to her 'true Greekness' by FSU Greeks. She told me that in her encounters with FSU Greeks she does not know, she is commonly asked where is she from, and then confronted with the more critical question: 'Do you speak Pontic or Turkish?' She felt that after her negative answer people would look at her a bit strangely. She told me that she has had difficulties coming to terms with such reactions. It is paradoxical that Alina, who was convinced that non-Greek FSU immigrants had managed to acquire the *homogenís* status in large numbers due to information she had acquired, was possibly thought of and referred to by other FSU Greeks as a case that proved this perception.

Ideas which FSU Greeks entertained about the existence of 'false Greeks' were based on information about corruption in the process of citizenship attribution. For a limited number of my FSU Greek informants, the category of 'false Greeks' also included people, usually of (mixed) Greek descent, who expressed low or no attachment to a Greek identity. I have argued that native residents' assessment about the truth or falseness of immigrants' Greekness was based on reasoning that assumed a linear relation between culture, consciousness, and descent. Cultural difference between them and FSU Greeks was thought of as expressing the supposedly 'non-Greek consciousness' of the latter and was taken as proof of their lack of actual Greek descent. Following this line of reasoning they excluded people who they could not or did not want to fit into their idealized image about the Greeks of the diaspora.

This simplistic relationship between culture and descent was not endorsed by FSU Greeks. Expectantly, not everybody who did not speak Greek or Pontic was suspected of being a false Greek in the FSU Greek community, nor were any of the behaviours and cultural norms singled out by the natives as characteristics of 'false Greeks' recognized as such by them. Culture alone was generally downplayed as a defining criterion of Greekness, which was usually equated with Greek descent. However, culture in relation to the issue of 'Greek consciousness' was used by a few of my informants to exclude some FSU Greeks. To my question if they personally knew any false FSU Greeks, a limited number of my informants referred to people of distant Greek descent who had told them they did not feel Greek. These would not necessarily be treated as false Greeks by native Greeks. Fr

instance, Alina, a university graduate, in all likelihood would not be suspected of being a false Greek by natives.

Concerning the official criteria of Greekness, as mentioned in chapter four, in 2001 a 'Greek consciousness test' was introduced as an extra pre-requisite in the determination of FSU Greeks' Greekness and the attribution of citizenship rights. This signified a change in the official criteria of national belonging for FSU Greeks. Although it was possibly instituted to prevent the attribution of Greek nationality to immigrants of non-Greek descent, and it was connected to the realization that the existing process was not unassailable (Voutira 2004), the law suggested that not all persons of Greek descent are worthy to be recognized as Greeks. On top of their Greek descent, they must also have 'a Greek consciousness'. In practice, however, testing Greek consciousness boiled down to examining immigrants' knowledge of the Greek customs that had developed in the Soviet Union, as well as their knowledge of basic Greek history and Greek language skills.

Kleanthis, an FSU Greek who worked in Greece as a lawyer and was also the president of an FSU Greek cultural association, was very critical of the 'Greek consciousness' test. He claimed that testing the 'Greek consciousness' of people of Greek descent is an absurdity and should be reserved only for non-Greek immigrants. To prove his point he focused on the Greek history requirements of the test. Although he accepted that some FSU Greeks might not be knowledgeable about Greek history, he claimed this should not be a reason to deny them access to Greek citizenship; not knowing the history of your nation is regrettable, but is a criticism which can be levelled at native Greeks too. In his view, if the law were consistent then it should also have called for the withdrawal of citizenship from those native Greeks who did not know Greek history. Most of my FSU Greek informants would agree with Kleanthis that the changes to citizenship attribution introduced in 2001 were a negative development. As I will describe in the following, most of them were very negative about the process of citizenship acquisition as whole.

During my second stay in Nikopoli I visited the immigration office in Thessaloniki prefecture, which at that time served as the local office responsible for naturalization. Although I had previously met an FSU Greek person who worked in the office, this acquaintance did not ease my access. Nobody would speak to me without the permission of the director, who told me that I should speak to him only after I had read the law. He wanted to limit our discussion to the formal requirements. When I posed a question about the issue of the 'false Greeks', he replied that he was writing an article on the topic which would soon

be published. He was unwilling to enter into discussion on the issue, but assured me that through his article I would become sufficiently informed.

Soon after our meeting I had to return to the Netherlands, and by the time I returned to Greece he was no longer serving in the same post. I did not manage to find his article. However, I found an interview he had given in a local newspaper, a year and a half prior to our short meeting. In this interview he claimed that 50% of the documents presented by applicants are falsified. He praised the work done by the personnel in his office and he underlined his determination to do the utmost to stop forgery. He further provided data according to which applications for naturalizations by aspiring FSU Greeks were decreasing during his administration, which he presented as an outcome of the strict monitoring performed by the office. As I will describe in the following, such information is misleading and does not provide a reliable indication about the extent to which non-Greek FSU immigrants try to pass as FSU Greeks.

My FSU Greek contacts provided me with a lot of information about the arbitrariness of the processes of citizenship acquisition for *homogenís* immigrants, and about their difficulty in acquiring the required documents determining their Greek descent. This was especially the case after the 2001 changes in the law which required certain documents to be sealed with the seal of The Hague. Since several of the states from which FSU Greeks emigrated did not, and some still do not, issue the seal of The Hague, the process became substantially more difficult and the document accreditation process could take several years. Some of my informants accused other FSU Greeks of bribing officials to speed up the process.

One of my FSU Greek acquaintances revealed to me that he had forged the birth certificate of an old FSU Greek of Pontic descent who was unable to locate this document any longer. Another of my informants told me that before the 2009 elections she had filed a request to the prime minister's office to ask for the promotion of the application of an FSU Greek friend of hers. The latter was of mixed Greek origin and had a large family (*πολύτεκνη*). Her case was promoted, and Greek citizenship gave her access to the allowance for parents with large families. This was critical due to her precarious economic situation. Besides these accounts which concerned the informal practices of FSU Greeks, I was also told numerous stories about the mistakes and inconsiderateness of native Greek bureaucrats. As Kleanthis told me:

They [the officials] invalidate people's applications for the most irrelevant reasons. When you lose your identity card and you issue a new one, right? Well, that can cause great problems because when they see different

numbers in different documents they flag your application. To give you another example, an employer makes a mistake in your application which he corrects, seals and counter-signs. The next employer sees the correction, does not accept it and invalidates the application.

Many of my informants also referred to cases whereby people who immigrated later than other members of their family were denied access to citizenship because their relatives had been registered with different names as a result of arbitrary decisions by bureaucrats about their names' transliteration into Greek. FSU Greeks who had previously run or still ran cultural associations, like Kleanthis, capitalized on their connections at the administration and their knowledge of the workings of bureaucracy to pursue citizenship applications by fellow FSU Greeks in exchange for payment.

Returning to the issue of *homogenís* status acquisition by 'false Greeks' and how common this process was, my informants who thought it only concerned a limited number of people argued that if it had been widespread then the city would not have had such sizeable FSU immigrant communities; the FSU immigrants would have accessed the *homogenís* status and through it citizenship rights.¹⁹⁰ In their opinion, this practice therefore only concerned a minimal number of people and had happened almost exclusively during the early years of migration. As example they referred to exceptional cases of non-Greek people who took over the identity of dead FSU Greek co-villagers by bribing the local authorities. Overall, I tended to accept their claims as more plausible.¹⁹¹ Yet if this is the case, why then did several of my FSU Greek informants endorse the opposite idea?

In our first meeting, my roommate Yuri had also told me that many non-Greek FSU immigrants had acquired Greek citizenship by forging documents that said they were Greek. His perception was based on information he obtained from

¹⁹⁰ I did meet a Georgian immigrant who had earlier attempted to access citizenship rights via FSU Greek status and failed. At the time of my fieldwork, I was told that a Georgian immigrant had to pay 4,000 euros to be smuggled to Greece and then 5,000 euros to be issued a residence permit through a white marriage. The relatively high price of those practices seems to corroborate the argument that access to the *homogenís* status was limited among non-FSU Greeks. If access to citizenship rights was easily accessible they would not turn to such costly and temporary options.

¹⁹¹ In order for aspiring FSU immigrants to access the privileged migration status of FSU Greeks they must have both information about the existence of illegal networks that provided falsified documents and the necessary capital to afford them. The fact that the access of non-Greeks to *homogenís* status was not widespread is also corroborated by the fact the immigration to Greece during the 1990s correlates significantly with the depopulation of Greek villages in the former Soviet Union, especially in Caucasus and Central Asia, and the shrinkage of the Greek population in cities that had a significant Greek population in those areas.

other FSU Greeks and from a native Greek civil servant who was involved in the process of nationality verification. The latter had told him that in the early years of migration she had helped many non-Greek people to acquire the *homogenís* status and flee the war in Caucasus.

Since we were living together, I had the opportunity to discuss the issue with him several times after our initial discussion. The information I got from other FSU Greeks led him to question his initial perceptions. Later, Yuri met Filipos, an FSU Greek from Georgia, who claimed that he was well informed on these issues because his father held an important bureaucratic position in Georgia. Yuri explained my research to him and asked him if he would like to speak to me. He was positive. We went to his house together. Filipos told us that this process mainly concerned the Armenians. In his view, since Armenians historically had lived close to Greeks in the Ottoman Empire, they often had a distant Greek relative, or at least could 'discover' one. He further added that he did not like Armenians because they are cunning. When I asked him about Georgia he said that similar processes happened there too, through forgery of identification documents. He also added that at that time it was the Albanian immigrants who were acquiring Greek citizenship 'simply by conscripting to the Greek army' (the latter is not true since Greek citizenship attribution through voluntary conscription to the army concerns only people of Greek descent (*homogenís*)). Yuri was not persuaded by these words; he told me he felt Filipos was exaggerating 'without knowing that much after all'. I concurred.

I discerned two categories of FSU Greeks who believed that access to the *homogenís* status by non-Greek immigrants was widespread. The first category included people like Alina, who relied on information they got from other FSU Greeks. The second category included people who claimed they knew about it, usually without specifying how, and who tended to relate this practice to the supposed immoral and unscrupulous character of FSU nationals, especially the Caucasians. They claimed that Armenians, Georgians, and other Caucasian non-Greek immigrants were able to benefit from the state provisions through illegal means while FSU Greeks were victimized by the Greek state. Possibly, these FSU Greeks were tending to exaggerate the existence of false Greeks to support their negative attitudes about Caucasian immigrants and their feelings of mistreatment by state authorities.

From their perspective, it was due to the behaviour of false Greeks and non-Greek FSU immigrants that FSU Greeks have ‘acquired a bad name’.¹⁹² They believed that natives do not differentiate the ‘true FSU Greeks’ and felt that they should familiarize themselves with this distinction. However, as described in the previous section, native Greeks do differentiate between ‘false and real Greeks’, though according to subjective judgments and arbitrary criteria corresponding to their idealized image of diaspora Greeks. Thus, the discourse of those FSU Greeks about the false Greeks in their interpersonal relations with native Greeks simply reinforces the pre-existing ideas of the latter.

7.2 Becoming Pontic

The Pontic Greeks (*Pónti*)

As described in the second chapter, the population of the contemporary Greek nation state was shaped by two counterbalancing trends: one the one hand, forced or voluntary outflows of non-Greek populations, and on the other hand, inflows – or inclusion through territorial expansion – of populations which felt attached to and desired to be recognized as belonging to the community of Greek descent. As a result of this process, the Greek nation state came to be perceived as an ethnically homogenous entity. Nevertheless, although much of the multicultural reality of the Ottoman past was eradicated from public space and memory, the population that comprises the Modern Greek polity is still characterized by a substantial internal cultural diversity. This is reflected in the survival of a number of distinct Greek ethnocultural identities.¹⁹³

Even within the territorially restricted first independent state, the Greek population was divided into a number of ethno-cultural subgroups, some with a specific spatial location (e.g. Maniat), and some without (e.g. Arvanites). Belonging to these groups was considered compatible with but subordinate to belonging to the Greek community of descent; one was firstly Greek, and then she/he could be Vlach, Sarakatsan, Tsakon, etc. The Greek ethno-cultural mosaic was gradually enriched through the territorial expansion of the state (Slavic

¹⁹² After my question, however, the majority acknowledged that it was not only non-Greek FSU immigrants that are to be blamed, but a minority among their own people which also engages in behaviour that stigmatizes their group. This issue is further elaborated in what follows.

¹⁹³ Even though those identities are included in an overarching Greek identity, they are not solely cultural identities. In as far their distinctiveness is defined in terms of common origin, they have an ethnic element.

speaking Greeks, Thracians), while 'new' groups (Cappadocian, Smyrniot, Pontic) came to be added with the 1920s forced population exchange. For the 1920s refugees, regional identification provided a means of orientation and adjustment, a way of creating a familiar geography out of an uncharted expanse (Hirschon, 1989). These identities crystallized through interaction with the native Greeks who were already accustomed to distinguish between Greeks in terms of regional and ethnocultural belonging. It is in this context that Pontic Greek emerged as a meaningful category and a term of self-identification.

In the course of time the refugee and indigenous ethno-cultural groups 'assimilated in the Greek mainstream by remaking it', as one could say drawing a parallel with the American case (see Alba & Nee, 2003). Several aspects that marked their difference fused and became established as parts of a common Greek culture, such as the Arvanitic folk dress *foustanella* that became the outfit of Greek ceremonial military units and the Smyrniot music that became a major influence for many contemporary Greek music styles. Other aspects, notably those relating to linguistic difference, were renounced. For the groups whose Greekness was debated, notably the Slavic-speaking Greeks, renouncing their language was forced and provisional to their inclusion in the national community. For others, such as the Arvanites, it was tactical.

Certain groups, notably the Pontic Greeks, retained a sense of separate identity whose strength and persistence in successive generations is impressive. They further preserved a number of cultural traits as characteristic of their group and which separate them from other Greeks. For the Pontics, their identity also has a diasporic dimension: being a Pontic Greek is to claim origins in 'the lost homeland of Pontos'. The perseverance of the Pontic identity is an attempt to remain faithful to their ancestral land and to assert allegiance to the past (Fann, 1991). Memories of Pontos, which unfold around a discourse of loss and survival, bind together Pontics in a common mission: to mentally keep their ancestral homeland alive. The diasporic aspect of their identity is a major reason for its enduring salience over the years.

A second reason relates to its cultural content. Pontic Greek history is linked to the main body of Greek historiography, cited as an example of the continuity of the Greek nation (Sideri, 2006). Yet it unfolds to a certain extent autonomously from the history of the modern state. Physical separation from other Greek communities led over the years to the development of a distinctive culture in Pontos, manifested in their idiosyncratic music, dances, and dialect. Their culture marks a clear border with other Greeks – something which constrained their acceptance by other Greeks at earlier phases. However, it did not pose an insuperable obstacle to their long-term acceptance in the Greek community of

descent. Pontic Greeks are Christian Orthodox, while the Pontic Greek language, although almost unintelligible to other Greeks, is still a form of the Greek language; and, indeed, it contains linguistic forms that are closer to Ancient Greek than Modern Greek. This is something in which Pontic Greeks take pride, and has been used as symbolic capital against charges of non-Greekness. In short, Pontic Greek culture is *different enough* to underpin a separate identity within the bounds of an overarching Greek identity and at the same time not *too* different to be rejected as non-Greek.¹⁹⁴

However, the above should not be thought to imply that the establishment of Pontic as a legitimate Greek identity was an easy or swift process. Asserting their difference and establishing their identity was long struggle for the Pontic Greeks. Upon arrival in Greece, Pontics, like any other refugee group, were treated with suspicion. As Hirshon (1989) notes, they were nicknamed *auotides* (from their pronunciation of the demonstrative pronoun *a-óitos*, instead of the contemporary Greek *aftós*) while overt rejection was expressed with the derogatory term ‘Turkish seed’ (*τουρκόσποροι*) which challenged their Greekness. Popular jokes about the fictitious Pontic characters ‘Giorikas’ and ‘Kostikas’ ridiculed Pontic people. The jokes represented these characters as acting in illogical ways and reproduced negative stereotypes about Pontics in general.

The first generation experienced Pontic identity as stigmatizing, and a number of people attempted to hide their ancestry. For the second generation, growing acculturation and upward mobility was accompanied with a gradual diminishing of the negative connotations of being categorized as Pontic (Vergeti, 2000). In the meantime an active Pontic community had started to emerge.

As early as the 1930s, ethnic associations were established (‘Ευξείνιος Λέσχης), ethnic periodicals were published (*Αρχαίον του Πόντου*), and stage plays were written and performed in the Pontic dialect. In the 1950s, the Virgin Mary Soumela Church in Vermio (northern Greece) was established as the religious and ethnic centre for the community in the new homeland. The church is named after the Great monastery in historic Pontos from which it hosts artifacts.¹⁹⁵ The

¹⁹⁴ An interesting comparison may be drawn between the Arvanites and the Pontics. The Arvanite narrative about their Greekness unfolds around theories of authentic descent from the ancients preserved by westerly isolation in contrast to the supposed corruption of the ‘Anatolian Byzantine’ (Hart, 1999). The Greekness of Arvanites, whose modern history is intertwined with that of the Modern Greek state, was never seriously doubted. However, there was also no serious attempt from their community at preserving their language; being an Albanian dialect it deviates from the norm of Greeks speaking Greek. Their linguistic specificity is downplayed and even renounced in recent generations.

¹⁹⁵ These were transferred to Greece in 1930.

15th August procession for the dormition of the Virgin Mary serves as a commemoration of Pontos and as an ethnic gathering.

The 60s and 70s saw a proliferation of cultural clubs which aimed to disseminate Pontic customs. These were in addition to the already existing community institutions and provided a platform for cultural activities and the maintaining of solidarity among Pontics in Greece. Second- and third-generation Pontics became familiar with the histories, geographies, and customs of the life of their forebears in Pontos without having ever visited the place. Yet gradually the Pontic culture became stripped of its substance as ‘a way of life’ (Vergeti, 2000) and became the ground of a symbolic identity. This is expressed and practiced primarily through Pontic music and dance, and less so through Pontic dialect, theatre, or cuisine.

During the 1980s, second- and third-generation Pontic intellectuals attempted to politicize the Pontic Greek identity. This endeavour went hand in hand with a growing interest in the history of Pontic Hellenism and resulted in a substantial output of publications, as well as the establishment of the Centre of Pontic Studies. In addition, the International Pontic Congress was inaugurated, this being a periodic event bringing together worldwide Pontic associations and transnational Pontic organizations. The scope of action of the Pontic community was extended into the global arena and the goals set by the Pontic intellectuals were adopted by cultural associations throughout Greece and the diaspora (Voutira, 2006).

One key outcome of the political mobilization during that decade was the introduction of the issue of the Pontic ‘genocide’ by the Turks (see appendix I.4, pp. 246). Unlike the Armenians, who had begun their worldwide campaign immediately after the mass exterminations in 1915, the Pontic Greeks introduced the issue of their genocide by the Turks (1914–1922) some sixty years later (Voutira, 2006). At the national level, after active lobbying and significant pressure from Congress representatives, the Greek Parliament unanimously recognized May 19 as the day of National Commemoration of the Pontic Greek genocide (Voutira, 2006). It should be noted that Pontic associations and their federations had grown as interest groups in domestic policy, and were capable of exerting significant political influence (Deltsou, 2009).

In the international arena, Pontic associations further extended the scope of their lobbying activity, promoting their diasporic project of getting the Pontic genocide recognized (Voutira, 2006). They also became concerned with Pontic-speaking Muslims in Turkey and their cultural rights. Exhibiting a paternalistic mentality, Pontic associations portrayed them as dormant Greeks or forced Muslims, and

acted as self-proclaimed protectors for such groups. Attempts were made to engage Greek government action in that direction (Baltsiotis, 2009).

During the 1980s, in the context of their wider political mobilization and diasporic organization, Pontic associations developed contacts with Greek associations in the FSU. Pontic associations were the first to show solidarity towards the Greek Diaspora in the Soviet Union. It should be noted that some members of the two communities were bound by kinship ties. Such ties were particularly common among FSU Greeks who had relocated to the Caucasus from Pontos at the time of the 1920s forced population exchange. In that turbulent period many families were divided between Greece and the former Soviet Union. In addition, in the period from 1922 until 1933, 27,000 people emigrated from the Soviet Union to Greece, leaving behind members of their families. The majority of my Pontic FSU Greek informants had at least a distant relative in Greece.

The native Pontic associations showed solidarity by attesting sameness in ancestry and attempting to help FSU Greeks organise politically. As mentioned in chapter 3, through their mobilization they effectively pointed out to the Greek state authorities their moral duties towards a forgotten and much afflicted twig of the Greek family tree; these same associations were later recognized by governmental officials as relevant actors in the implementation and design of policy towards the FSU Greeks (see Vergeti, 1998).

The rhetoric of the Pontic associations, which treated the Greek diaspora in the former Soviet Union as a Pontic diaspora, was unofficially adopted by the authorities. Although in official state language FSU Greeks are referred to as Greek-descent people from the former Soviet Union, politicians in parliamentary discussions, public talks, and interviews commonly refer to them as the Pontics from the former Soviet Union. The same holds for media and academic publications. The existence of non-Pontic Greeks in the former Soviet Union is ignored and the Greek diaspora is commonly referred to as the Pontic diaspora. The prevalence of this discourse had repercussions for the collective perception in Greece of FSU Greeks. This is reflected even in the stigmatizing label 'Russo-Pontic'. Etymologically, this word does not refer to Greeks from Russia (or people of mixed Russian-Greek descent), but to rather to Pontics from 'Russia' (or people of mixed Russian-Pontic descent). The vast majority of Greeks, including myself before I started this research, are unaware that not all people from the FSU Greek diaspora originate from Pontos (see chapter 3.1).

The following anecdote is indicative of the dominance of this perception even among state bureaucrats, and its reproduction by them. When FSU Greeks

acquired Greek citizenship, they were given the option either to change their surname back to its Greek form if it had been Russified, or to choose the surname of their Greek ancestors where they were the offspring of mixed marriages. Ivan, who had a Ukrainian surname from his father, wished to register himself with the surname of his Greek mother. His mother's surname is not Pontic – Pontic surnames can be identified by the ending *-edes* or *-ades*. Ivan described the bureaucrat as a strict man. He told me that he looked him in the eye and asked him 'are you a Greek?' 'Yes' Ivan responded. 'Ok' he said. 'So, which name do you want to keep'. Ivan expressed his desire to keep his mothers name.

To Ivan's surprise, the bureaucrat replied that this was not possible. Since Ivan was not an adult (he was seventeen at that time), the state clerk said, he needed to bring in a number of new documents in order to change his name. Ivan objected, saying that his mother's name could be checked on the basis of the papers he already had. The bureaucrat, however, precluded this option. Instead he proposed an arbitrary name that sounded like his Ukrainian one, ending in *-edes* to signify Pontic descent, and unlike his mother's name. Ivan told me: 'I feared that maybe he would reject my application, so I accepted it and now I am stuck with this surname.' Orestis Aggelides (2000), originating from a Turkic speaking village in Tsalka also provides some interesting information in this regard. In his book, he writes that the officers in the Greek embassy in Moscow were asking FSU Greek immigrants to change the ending of their name to *-edes* (2000: 18). For that reason his family changed its name to Aggelides from Aggelov. Nevertheless, after doing some research into their family history they found out that their original family name was Aggelou and not Aggelides.

Native and FSU Pontics in Nikopoli

Pontos had not been a marker of identification in the former Soviet Union. People of Greek descent were brought up to think of themselves as Greeks within the Soviet nationalities model. They called themselves *Romii* or *Urum*, depending on whether they spoke Turkic or Greek languages, or used *Greki*, their formal Russian ethnonym. FSU Greeks were familiarized with the Pontic identity as a separate, albeit Greek identity when they immigrated to Greece or when they came in contact with native Greeks in the former Soviet Union (see also Popov 2000; Voutira, 2006). Several of my informants told me that they became aware of 'their' regional Pontic ethnocultural identity and were extensively informed about 'their' Pontic history when they met other Greeks in the historic homeland. In the words of one of them:

We did not know what Pontii means there [in the FSU]. Everybody was Greek... we did not know those differences. We called ourselves Romioi. Only here in Greece we learned that there are different Greeks like Cretans, Thracians etc. Here we learned that we are called *Pontii*.

The adoption of the Pontic identity by FSU Greeks after migration has been very widespread. This is a multilayered process which I will describe in more detail in the following sections of this chapter. For my present analysis regarding the influence of Ponticness in the relations which developed in Nikopoli, it suffices to comment that the Pontic identity was also endorsed by the vast majority of FSU Greeks in the neighbourhood.

Nikopoli, despite its majority Pontic population, was not perceived or described (neither by residents nor by non-residents) as a 'Pontic neighbourhood' at the time of my fieldwork.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, extended relationships between FSU Pontics and native Pontics had not developed. Members of two communities living in the neighbourhood are not bound with kinship ties, excepting a very few cases of 1960s Soviet Greeks who lived in the *réma* and residents of Efxinoupoli. Gioura, an FSU Greek informant of Pontic descent in his thirties, commented:

We do not know each other... we do not have much contact. Maybe their parents or grandparents speak Pontic. We also learned to speak Pontic through our parents, I do not know the language perfectly but I can speak it. But the fact that we are both of Pontic origin does not mean that we are the same. We know that we have common roots but they came earlier to Greece. During the massacre in Turkey, some people went to Russia and others to Greece. I think most went to Russia, I am not sure. In any case others came here and were socialized here. As a result we are not the same.

In a similar manner, most my native Pontic informants told me they had not personally met many FSU Greek people of Pontic descent from Nikopoli.

Different habits regarding spending free time and the use of public space have contributed in preventing the development of close relations. Also important is the segregation of the two communities and the lack of local institutions that could bring them into contact (see chapter 6.1). In this period, Nikopoli was also characterized by a lack of community associations. Old Nikopoli's neighbourhood assembly no longer ran, while the neighbourhood association in Efxinoupoli was

¹⁹⁶ That is despite the presence of the monument to Pontic Hellenism in Efxinoupoli and a number of shops and cafes with Pontic character or names owned both by natives and immigrants.

short-lived (see chapter 5.2, pp. 114). Moreover, at the time of my research there was only one active cultural association, the one established by the native Pontics from the village of Nikopoli. This association started strictly as a 'village association'. By hosting classes of Pontic dance and music it extended its membership to people who were not closely connected with the village. However, only a limited number of FSU Greek children joined the native Pontics in the dance lessons. Not many FSU Greeks in the upper neighbourhood knew that the association existed.

Those structural and cultural characteristics could partly explain the lack of interaction and the limited number of interpersonal friendships that have developed between FSU and native Pontics. Yet the attitudes of the native Pontic residents towards their FSU Greek neighbours have also played a role.

Taking into account the common origin which 'native' Pontics share with a large segment of the FSU Greek immigrants, as well as the political activity of their associations in favour of the Greek Diaspora, one could expect native Pontics to be positive towards FSU Greeks. My fieldwork data did not confirm this hypothesis. Several of my native Pontic informants acknowledged the Greekness of FSU Greeks in the neighbourhood and sympathized with their experience in Greece. They further praised their strong family ties and their hard-working ethos, which they presented as characteristics of Pontic people. Nevertheless, there were also several native Pontics who were convinced that only a small minority of them were real Pontics, and who were extremely negative towards them. The president of the local Pontic association, and Yannis, the owner of a local *kafenío* with a Pontic character,¹⁹⁷ exemplify this polarity. On the one hand the president was positive about the immigrants and estimated that Pontics numbered up to 80% or 90% among them. On the other hand, Yannis claimed that Pontics formed a maximum of 20% of the immigrant population and used very strong negative words to express his opinion about the rest.

Overall, the discourse of native Pontics in Nikopoli did not differ substantially from that of the rest of the native residents. It was in line with the dominant trend of relating opinions about the immigrants to their (lack of) Greekness. The difference was in the degree to which that was done. On the one hand, native Pontics *consistently* explained their views about FSU Greeks with reference to the (non) Pontic descent of the latter. On the other hand, not all non-Pontic natives made the distinction between 'real' and 'false' Greeks. A few of them even expressed themselves negatively about FSU Greeks while acknowledging their

¹⁹⁷ Posters for performances of Pontic music were displayed in the windows of the *kafenío* while photos of Pontic artists were displayed inside and the Pontic map was painted on one of the walls.

Greekness or Ponticness. To the contrary, native Pontics who were negative about FSU Greeks *always* explained that they were not referring to the ‘real Pontics’ (read: real Greeks).

Non-Pontic natives appeared more distanced from FSU Greeks while Pontic natives felt the need to either defend them, or deny their Ponticness and dissociate from them. For instance, Michalis told me:

Pontics are nice people. The reason why the Pontics from Russia are a bit difficult is because they were calling them Russo-Pontics. What made them reserved and negative is the attitude of others here in Greece.

To the contrary, Takis was convinced that the ‘difficult’ ones are not Pontics:

Some of the people who live in this area, not the Pontics – I am a Pontic too, my grandfather had come from Pontos in 1922 – but the Armenians, the Georgians and the Chechens, they came from several remote uncivilized villages and they do not have the same mentality with us here.

Finally, rather than speaking vaguely about Russo-Pontics or Russians, like the other native Greeks, native Pontics distinguished between ‘good Pontics’ and ‘bad Caucasian peoples’. Georgians, who form a sizeable immigrant group in Thessaloniki, were singled out in a particularly unfavourable manner.

To a certain extent, those particularities in the discourse of native Pontics can be seen as attempts to prevent their identity from being spoilt by association with the stigmatized Russo-Pontic label. For instance, one of my native Pontic informants, who ‘revealed’ to me that his family had immigrated to Greece from Russia in the 1930s, added that it is not necessary for me to take a note of that. This is an exceptional but indicative case. He did not want to make public that his ancestors had also come from Russia, in order to avoid association with the FSU Greeks. The immigration of the FSU Greeks and their treatment by the dominant groups might have awakened memories of native Pontics’ struggle to have their identity accepted by other Greeks. Two encounters during my fieldwork demonstrated to me that, although they are an extremely small minority, some native Greeks still doubted the Greekness of Pontic people.

Giorgos is not a resident of Nikopoli but he used to visit the neighbourhood on Thursdays for the open market. I met him in a shop in Nikopoli owned by a friend of his. I was speaking to the owner of the shop about the relations with people in the neighbourhood and he intervened to lump FSU and native Pontics together. In his opinion they are no different; they are both non-Greek people, or

more precisely descendants of Hellenized non-Greek populations, or so he claimed. Giorgos attempted to prove his point with reference to the physical characteristics of Pontic people, which he described as non-Greek, and their music and dances, which he claimed to be more similar to those of the Zulu people than to the Greeks. A similar opinion was expressed to me by Takis, a person I knew independently of my research, in a social occasion outside the research field. The opinions of Takis and Giorgos were not taken very seriously by the other people present. However, they can be seen as remnants of ideas which were more widespread in recent history. Waltraud Kokot (personal communication, 9 September 2009), who carried out ethnographic research in the early 1980s in Touba, a district in East Thessaloniki, recorded that the Greekness of Pontic people was doubted by a considerable segment of local populations.

Avoiding association with a stigmatized identity and safeguarding their Greekness are aspects that have influenced native Pontics' discourse on FSU Greeks as well as their relations with them. However they were not the sole determinants for FSU Greeks' exclusion from the Pontic category; the denial of their Ponticness by several Pontic natives should not be seen as solely tactical. Cultural differences between immigrants and natives played an equally significant role in shaping perceptions of each other. Especially in the local context of Nikopoli where interpersonal relations were limited, such differences tended to be overemphasized by the superficial interactions in the public space. In fact, it was those cultural differences that raised the doubts about the Ponticness of the immigrants, who were then excluded collectively from the Pontic group to protect their identity from being spoilt by association with them.

Language usage by FSU Greeks in public space was a major issue that shaped native Pontics' perceptions of FSU Greeks as not being Pontics and thus as not Greeks either. It should be noted that a minority of third-generation native Pontic Greeks speak Pontic, and almost none speaks the language in public spaces. However, given the widespread suspicion about the Greekness of the FSU Greeks, speaking Pontic was expected of them in order to prove their Ponticness and through that their Greekness.

As mentioned earlier, the Pontic language was not widely spoken in the public space of Nikopoli: Russian dominated in discussions among FSU Greeks adults while the Pontic language was mostly spoken in Efxinoupoli, where native residents barely ever go. The Turkish-speaking FSU Greeks, who form a large segment of the immigrant population in the neighbourhood, also played a significant role in representations about the origin of the immigrants. Even though approximately one third of the FSU Greek population in Nikopoli speaks

Turkish, which is equal to the population that speaks Pontic, native residents were more exposed to Turkish since the majority of the Turkish-speaking FSU Greeks were living in lower parts of the neighbourhood where native Greeks lived too.

Older generations of descendants of 1920s refugees, notably the Pontics, are aware of the diffusion of the Turkish language among the Greek populations in Asia Minor. Many 1920s refugees spoke Turkish either as part of being bilingual in Greek or Turkish, or as their mother tongue. Those people were familiar with the language; they could recognize it and some of them even knew how to speak it¹⁹⁸. However, the majority of native Greeks cannot recognize the language, and even if they could, they would not categorize its speakers as Pontic. The large presence of Turkish-speaking FSU Greeks in the neighbourhood was an important reason why the Ponticness of FSU Greeks was widely doubted in Nikopoli.

The Turkophone FSU Greeks

Shifting our attention to the FSU Greeks, and in particular their relation to the Pontic identity and their perceptions of the native Pontics, the Turkish-speaking Greeks form a very interesting case that merits separate analysis. Describing the origins of the Greek Diaspora on the eve of the Russian Empire in chapter 3, I discerned three categories. First, the Marioupol Greeks together with the late eighteenth century immigrants who settled in the north-west Black Sea area in present day Ukraine; second, the Pontic-speaking Greeks who immigrated or were forced to leave from different areas of the Pontic lands in successive waves from the mid nineteenth century until the 1920s; and third, the Turkish-speaking Greeks who fled from north-eastern Asia Minor primarily in the early nineteenth century. For simplicity I will refer to the latter group as Turkophone FSU Greeks. Having said that, it needs to be remembered that a sizeable segment of the Marioupol Greeks also spoke Turkic (Tatar) dialects (see chapter 3.2). Moreover, it should be clarified that the language of the Turkophone FSU Greeks is a central Anatolian Turkic dialect that differs from the contemporary Turkish language.

¹⁹⁸ Here it should be recalled that the language that the Turkophone FSU Greek speaks is a Turkic dialect from Eastern Anatolia that differs substantially from contemporary Turkish and other dialects spoken by Greeks in Anatolia.

Since Marioupol Greeks form a very small segment of Nikopoli's FSU Greek population,¹⁹⁹ I was not able to assess their positioning in relation to the Pontic identity. Kaurinkoski, who did research in Athens, recorded that Marioupol Greeks develop contacts with Pontic associations in Greece but at the same time remain 'attached to their "community" of origin as well as to their own ethnic subculture, in Marioupol [...]' (2008, p. 80). Although no explicit reference is made to their identification, it can be ascertained that they have not adopted the external categorization of 'the Pontic Greek'. According to my data in Nikopoli, the position of Turkophone FSU Greeks was much more ambivalent. This connects with their closer relation to Pontos as a geographical, historical, and cultural category (see chapter 3.1).

In a context of widespread distrust about the Greek origin of the FSU immigrants, Turkophone FSU Greeks found it difficult to prove their Greekness even in their interpersonal relations with native Greeks. Their effort was impeded by their mother tongue, which, according to the ideologies of Greekness, appeared incompatible with their nationality and the dominant native perception of all FSU Greeks as being of Pontic origin. The fact that they or their ancestors did not speak Pontic, and the fact that some of them did not identify as Pontics, appeared suspicious to natives. Lelya, my Turkophone FSU Greek neighbour from Tetrisq' aro, Georgia told me:

You say you are Greek and you hear people commenting 'ok, ok we know we have all become Greeks now'. I wish I were Armenian so that I did not have to face all this suspicion about my descent' [...] I do not feel Pontic. I am a Greek. That's what I say and then they start commenting. I do not say anything anymore; I do not care what they think of me. But I cannot understand them. Is it possible for an Armenian to claim that she is a Greek? This is impossible. You are what you are and what you are is what you like. Can you lie about it?

¹⁹⁹ In Nikopoli, the presence of Marioupol Greeks is negligible. I only met one Marioupol woman in the Russian church, and she was not a resident of the neighbourhood. Also negligible was the presence of (the descendants of) the political refugees who had primarily immigrated in the 1980s. I only met one Russian person whose wife was a descendant of a political refugee. The Turkophone and Pontic-speaking FSU Greeks are present in comparable numbers: Efxinoupoli hosts more Pontic-speaking FSU Greeks and the lower part of the neighbourhood more Turkophone FSU Greeks. The local population composition mirrors that of Thessaloniki. The Turkophone FSU Greeks, being a smaller community in the former Soviet Union, comprise a clear minority in the overall immigrant population. However, they form a sizable segment in Thessaloniki where they are overrepresented. The population of Marioupol Greeks and other members of the Greek diaspora in Ukraine is the least sizable in the overall FSU Greek population as well as in that of Thessaloniki. Their immigration was much less intense in comparison to that of the other two categories (see chapter 3.3).

In the early years of migration, before the introduction of the *homogenis* card, the inability of some Turkish-speaking Greeks to prove their Greekness had resulted in their deportation from the country. When I met Odiseas, his tattoo on his left arm caught my eye. It said: *грек* – Russian for ‘Greek’. Odiseas told me he did it with the help of a friend when he was a teenager. Odiseas was born in a village in Tsalka District in 1972 and first immigrated to Greece in 1993 to avoid fighting the war in Abkhazia. He immigrated with a tourist visa and overstayed for two-and-a-half years. He worked as a seasonal worker in different places in Greece, covering temporary needs in agriculture and tourism. On the 1st of January 1996, while on Kos island, he was stopped by the police and asked for his identification papers. He was put in jail and a few days later deported to Moscow. Odiseas spoke Russian as well as Turkish and only a little Greek. The police officers were not convinced that he was of Greek origin, which would have absolved him from deportation.

Similarly to Lelya, Odiseas identified as Greek rather than Pontic. He explained to me that he is not Pontic since neither he nor his ancestors spoke Pontic. Tsalka, the district from which he originated, is a mountainous area to the west of Tbilisi in Georgia, where Greek populations formed the local majority before their emigration after the 1990s. The vast majority of the approximately 30,000 Greeks living there were Turkophone, originating from the wider Erzurum area. Turkophone Greeks had also settled in other areas in central-south Georgia, such as the Dmanisi, Tetrisq’ aro, and Marneuli regions, and others immigrated to Tbilisi as well as Stavroupol and Krasnodar Krai in Russia at later times. Yet until the late 1990s Tsalka remained their major concentration. In Tsalka there were a few villages such as Koubat and Neo Charaba, Santa and Tarson whose residents spoke Pontic Greek²⁰⁰ (Tsatsanidis 1999). The division between Romii and Urum, that is Pontic-speaking and Turkish-speaking Greeks, was already a meaningful one to Odiseas in Tsalka District. Language marked one’s belonging in one of those categories. In Greece, Odiseas got acquainted with the Pontic category and re-categorized the Romii as Pontic Greeks.

Socrates Aggelidis, an historian and linguist originating from a Turkic-speaking village in Tsalka and author of several books on the Greek Diaspora in the former Soviet Union, distinguished the Turkophone Greeks from the Pontic Greeks by origin rather than by language alone. I met him at the Centre for the Study and Development of Greek Culture in the Black Sea Region, where he worked. In our personal communication he told me that the Turkophones are not Pontic but

²⁰⁰ The population of villages such as Livad also originated in ‘Pontic’ areas (Aggelides 2000) but they assimilated to the local linguistic Turkic idiom.

Anatolian Greeks, since in his opinion the area they originate from is not part of the historic Pontic land. He implied that the construction of the Turkophones as Pontics is a-historic and impedes their acceptance by other FSU Greeks. His son, Orestis, had made this more explicit in his book (2000) in which he further criticizes actual FSU Pontics for being too proud of their Pontic origin and argues for the primacy of the national identity over the regional one. He also criticizes the state for imposing Pontic identity on a large segment of the FSU Greek population who are not 'real' Pontic Greeks.

The Turkophone Greeks had a marginal position in the former Soviet Union. Their Greekness was doubted not only by Pontic-speaking FSU Greeks but by Georgians too. Interestingly, the latter did not react negatively to those Greeks who spoke only Russian (Sideri, 2006). The following account from Galina, who originates from a Pontic-speaking village in Tsalka, is indicative.

The Turkophones were not highly esteemed in Georgia. Georgia is also a country that borders with Turkey and the Georgians were also occupied by the Turks. They would nickname them 'Turkish seeds'. For that reason the Turkophones who lived among Georgians, for instance in Tbilisi, learned Russian very well and did not speak Turkish at all. I did not know that my husband could speak Turkish when we first met, he never spoke the language, I only learned that much later [...]

Galina also elaborated on relations between the Pontic- and Turkish-speaking communities in the Tsalka area:

There were tensions between the Pontic- and Turkish-speaking villages in Tsalka. If one of us called them Turks they would become furious and violent, this was something they could not stand. There were a lot of contests between the villages, which continued here in cases culminating in fights [...] In Greece we [the Pontic speakers] felt that finally we had the upper hand because in Tsalka they were the majority. [...] On their side, they possibly thought that in Greece they would be accepted at last but here it was even worse. Possibly that is the reason why they are more isolated from the rest and they stay on their own.

The Turkophone Greeks were the dominant group in Tsalka, and their language, *bizim dil* (our language), as they call it, the local lingua franca.²⁰¹ However, outside Tsalka it was experienced as collective shame. It expressed (or exposed)

²⁰¹ Some of my Pontic-speaking Greek informants told me that local Turkophones had mocked them for their language in Tsalka.

their relationship with, or more precisely their earlier submission to, a detestable 'other'. The following collective myth is evoked by them to resolve the perceived paradox of 'being Greek and speaking Turkish' and to reply to charges of non-Greekness. In the Ottoman Empire, they say, they were forced to choose between keeping their language or their religion.²⁰² Choosing to keep their religion was claimed by them to have been a wise decision because it allowed them to save their Greekness in a hostile and oppressive environment.²⁰³ Their collective myth aimed to demonstrate to other Greeks that language was not so important in keeping one's Greekness. As their myth indicates, religious traditions have been particularly important as markers and symbols of Greekness for the Turkophone FSU Greeks. At the same time, people from Tsalka also tended to give to their children ancient Greek names as a means to emphasize their Greekness (see also Voutira, 2004).

Identification with their village or town of origin in the former Soviet Union remains strong among FSU Greek immigrants. Further, and despite the inter-village contestations, those from Tsalka also embrace a common Tsalkan identity; Tsalkans form a distinct group within the FSU Greek community in Greece. During the early years of migration this was also reflected in marriage politics. Marrying within the community was sought after by the Tsalkans, while other FSU Greeks resisted intermarriage with them. Both practices are gradually becoming much less common, as part of a general trend towards the diminishing of internal differences within the FSU Greek community; I return to this later in this chapter.

Tsalkans are praised by a small minority of FSU Greeks for being solidaristic to each other as well as hardworking and practical people. However, as mentioned, the majority speak negatively about them and dissociate from them. Tsalkans were stigmatized by a considerable segment of my FSU Greek informants as savage/uncivilized people, and seen as phallogractic and conservative by FSU Greek women in particular. Moreover, several of my informants claimed that they are not real Greeks. A limited number of FSU Greeks even scapegoat them, together with the 'fake Greeks' and non-Greek FSU nationals, blaming them for the negative image which FSU Greeks have acquired in Greece.

²⁰² Interestingly, a similar myth is narrated by the Marioupol Urums as an explanation of their Turkic mother tongue.

²⁰³ Building further on this myth, one of my informants from Tsalka told me that she does not trust that the local Pontic-speaking Greeks are real Christians, 'except if they recently converted back to Orthodox Christianity'.

Such negative representations target the Turkophones. Due to their overrepresentation in the area, the Tsalkan label is used for outsiders in Thessaloniki as a synonym for the Turkophone FSU Greeks.²⁰⁴ On their side, Tsalkans identify strongly with their area of origin and maintain close relations with other Tsalkans. Tsalkan men claim to be the bravest and the strongest of the FSU Greeks. In our discussions they also made reference to a survey done during the Soviet Union period which, according to what they told me, found that the people of Tsalka 'were the most educated in Georgia'.

Becoming Pontic

Rejection of the Pontic identity was not only expressed by several of my Turkophone FSU Greek informants but by a minority of my Pontic-speaking FSU Greek informants, too. As mentioned, Pontos had not been a marker of identification for any of the groups of the FSU Greek diaspora, including the Pontic speakers. The words of Galina are indicative:

I would prefer it if they called us Romii. It would have been better. I had not heard the word 'Pontic' before. What does it mean to be a Pontic? Ok, I do speak the Pontic language but I did not know that this language is called like that. In the village we had Pontic music and dances such as Kotchari [a Pontic dance] but I could only dance the basic steps. As far as music is concerned I cannot listen to more than two, three songs I get tired by the sound of the lyre. In Tbilisi we were listening to the songs of Theodorakis [a well-known Greek composer and songwriter] with my husband.

Soviet Pontics who had been living outside their place of origin in the former Soviet Union, and who had distanced themselves from the social norms and traditions practiced by Soviet Pontic communities, were less connected to the Pontic identity in Greece. Ponticness is practised through different cultural forms such as Pontic music and dance, the Pontic dialect, and Pontic culinary tastes. Not possessing those 'ethnic competences' made them feel less comfortable with it. Most importantly, FSU Greeks such as Galina, who were knowledgeable about contemporary Greek culture and history but had also a high socio-economic status, could directly claim a Greek identity. They did not have to highlight their Pontic descent to prove their Greekness.

²⁰⁴ The existence of small Turkophone FSU Greek communities in other areas in Georgia, such as Gkoumeret, Opret, and Tsints'qaro are much less well known, if known at all, among other FSU Greeks and natives.

A second factor that to a certain extent influenced the embracing of the Pontic identity by Soviet Pontics was the time of arrival of their ancestors in the former Soviet Union. Soviet Pontics whose descendants had fled Eastern Pontos in the aftermath of the First World War were more prone to relate to their Pontic identity in Greece as compared to descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants who were commonly more alienated from the history of their forefathers in Pontos.

Looking at the overall picture, however, the findings of my qualitative research indicate that the Pontic-speaking FSU Greeks who endorsed the Pontic identity formed a clear majority. This is further corroborated by data from the GEITONIES survey; 8 out of 10 identified as Pontics and only 2 out of 10 as Greeks. Interestingly, a sizeable segment of the Turkophone FSU Greeks also identified as Pontics. According to the GEITONIES data set it seems that they are the majority: 6 out of 10 Turkophone FSU Greeks residents in Nikopoli identified as Pontics and 4 out of 10 as Greeks. The Pontic identity was even more popular among the younger generations who were not included in the GEITONIES sample.²⁰⁵ Young Turkophone FSU Greeks learn the Pontic dances in FSU Greek feasts and are informed about the history of Pontos by other FSU Greeks and from books. They also participate in the commemorations of the Virgin Mary Soumela church and proudly identify as Pontics. Building on this, one may reasonably expect that in the coming years the Pontic identity will become clearly dominant also among Turkophone FSU Greeks. At the level of collective representations, the general associations of the FSU Greeks of Tsalka and that of the Turkophone village Avranlo are officially self-defined as Pontic and they are members of the Greek federation of Pontic associations.²⁰⁶

As the case of the Turkophone Greeks proves, identification with the Pontic identity is not a direct function of FSU Greeks' descent and culture, defined as fixed categories. Existing perceptions of common descent and cultural affinity facilitated (and their lack impeded) the feeling of belonging yet they were not necessary prerequisites. Barth has illustrated that ethnic identity is not a nebulous expression of culture but rather a matter of the social organization of cultural difference. Through interaction, certain cultural practices come to mark the boundary and as such they acquire symbolic significance for the self-ascription and other-ascription of identities (1969). Cultural practices that symbolically mark ethnic belonging may be adopted, appropriated, and reconstructed. Descent is also much less fixed than we usually tend to think. It is a matter of subjective

²⁰⁵ An age limit of 25 years applied.

²⁰⁶ Moreover, the owners of the website www.tsalka.gr describe their history as part of the Pontic history.

presentation of the placement of one's immediate reference group within given historical categories. There are discursive limitations on the degree to which such presentations may be accepted externally. Yet given the dominant native perception of the 'real FSU' Greeks as being exclusively Pontics, for the Turkophone FSU Greeks identifying as Pontics simply amounts to presenting their ancestors, the Christian Orthodox population of the Erzurum region, as part of the Pontic people.

If one accepts that feelings of belongingness can be discursively supported through particular presentations of the past and be practiced through the engagement with (symbolic) cultural activities that mark ethnic group boundaries, then the focus of the research ought to concern uncovering what makes people adopt or subconsciously internalize an identity. This requires an exploration of the dynamics within the interactional field (Barth, 1969), as well as a thorough analysis of the meanings possessed by the labels that are used to mark identities (Jenkins, 2008).

It has been shown that after immigration to Greece, and in interaction with the dominant society, FSU Greeks had to completely reposition their sense of belonging. They had to make sense of their selves and reframe their affiliations in relation to certain labels which were externally imposed. The content of such labels may be continuously reconstructed, yet at a given point in time they carry particular meanings and legacies. They are not empty vessels to which one can freely attribute any content. It is those embedded meanings that make them appealing or foreign to individuals and groups.

Having said that, the diasporic dimension of the Pontic identity seems to be an important reason for its internalization by FSU Greeks. FSU Greeks can easily situate their personal and collective history within that of the Pontic people. Through this process they acquire symbolic tools to reassess and re-narrate their past within the Greek historiography, to make sense of and negotiate their position within the Greek nation and to put forward claims and expectations for the future. The Pontic identity involves and expresses feelings of separation and loss, as well as memories of collective suffering with reference to the tragic history of the massacres and the violent uprooting of Pontic people in the 1920s. It further includes experiences of social marginality and the denial of recognition which Pontic people faced in their attempt to rebuild their homes in Greece. The lyrics of the following Pontic song, which is particularly popular among FSU Greeks, is a vivid illustration of such discourses:

*I built five houses and I had to desert them all
I am a refugee from the cradle, my lord I will go mad
Houses I left behind between torrents and the banks of the river
wells made of marble, water like my tears
And now I am thirsty here and I have no water to drink
I am ashamed to ask for it to wet my mouth
I am looking for you my homeland, like the cursed one
In foreign lands I am a Greek and in Greece a foreigner*
(Ch. Antoniadis 1997, my translation)

Several of my informants have been immigrants three or four times, and three generations of their family had experienced forced uprootings, deportations, and immigrations to places including Anatolia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine, Greece, and Western Europe. By endorsing the Pontic identity, such personal and family experiences of displacement are placed within and understood as part of the history of Pontic people. In this context, and in a loose and symbolic interpretation of the term 'genocide', several of my informants renamed the deportation of FSU Greeks to Central Asia a second 'genocide' of the Pontic people.²⁰⁷ Reference was also made to the alleged fate of Pontic people who, as they told me, are doomed to wander endlessly until they eventually return to Pontos. Moreover, the last line of the song – 'In foreign lands I am a Greek and in Greece a foreigner' – was echoed by several of my informants. It was cited as an accurate account of their marginal status both in the former Soviet Union and in Greece.

Another aspect of the Pontic identity which relate to its diasporic dimension is trust in the adaptive skills and the hard-working ethos of Pontic people: the certainty that 'no matter the difficulties, Pontic people will make it'. Such perceptions are supported through selective references. For instance Kalamaria, a former refugee district of Thessaloniki that primarily concentrated Pontic people and developed into one of the most well-off neighbourhoods in the city, is cited as an example of the virtues of the Pontic people. Reference to Kalamaria was also made by my FSU Greek informants. As one of them told me, 'Our people will make it. They call us Russo-Pontic but in a few years they will not dare to. Older generation Pontics transformed Kalamaria from a swamp to what it is today, and the same will happen with us'. Many more referred to the economic attainments of FSU Greeks in central Asia, where FSU Greeks had to build their lives up again after displacement, but also in other places in the FSU where they formed

²⁰⁷ One of my informants even told me he thinks that immigration to Greece was the third genocide of the Pontic people.

small minorities. These instances were recounted as evidence of the entrepreneurial and persistent character of Pontics.

Alongside the diasporic dimension of the Pontic identity there is one more crucial aspect that complements the meaning attributed to it by FSU Greeks; Ponticness signifies their cultural distance from the imagined homeland as well as the native population (Popov, 2010). Although FSU Greeks departed from Russia as Greeks, after settlement in the historic homeland they discovered their cultural difference from native Greeks who relabelled them as Russo-Pontics, new refugees, Pontics, returnees, etc. The Pontic identity was selected as a self-identification that indicated their felt experience of otherness as opposed to native Greeks but at the same time allowed their inclusion into Greek society.

Éllines and póntii – naschi and t'iméteron

One day I was transcribing my interviews at my apartment in Nikopoli when someone knocked at my door. It was an old FSU Greek man. He could speak no Pontic and only a little Greek. Given my poor knowledge of Russian, we entered into a short discussion half in Greek, half in Russian. He asked for a person whose name I could not recognize. To help me understand to whom he was referring, he gave me the following description: a Pontic person at his age who was supposed to live on this floor. He emphasized the word *Pontic* (Πόντιος). He did not refer to a *homogenís*, a refugee, a returnee, and of course not to a Russo-Pontic as a native would have done; nor did he use the word Greek. The person he was searching for was my next door neighbour, a Turkophone old man from Tsalka.

It was this incident that made me realize that most FSU Greeks introduce themselves as Pontics to native Greeks as a response to and rejection of the stigmatizing categorization of Russo-Pontics, as well as a way to distinguish themselves from them. In their discourse, the Pontic identity is contrasted to the category of *Ellin* (Έλληνας) or *Éllinas* (Ελληνας), Greek – or, more precisely Hellene – in Russian and Greek respectively. The latter terms are used to refer to native Greeks, while the word 'Pontic' is reserved as a label to denote their otherness in the native Greek society.

FSU Greeks were Greeks in the former Soviet Union and the Soviet successor states and became Pontics in Greece. This is illustrated in a graphic way by the following story I was told one day when I was dining with an FSU Greek couple and their relatives. My hosts told me: 'A friend of ours called a native Greek employer to ask for work. When the employer asked him if he is Greek [*Éllinas*],

he replied ‘no, I am Pontic’. My hosts burst into laughter for what he thought was a big blunder. In his attempt to describe his origin and to differentiate himself from the native Greek employer, their friend had replied as if he was not Greek. The terms *Éllinas* and Pontic are used to denote a ‘we/you’ distinction, but can be confusing if used out of context. Calling themselves Pontics is sufficient for FSU Greeks to assert their Grekness, since Pontics are Greeks too. However, presenting themselves as Pontics but not Greeks (*Éllines*) is tantamount to accepting what they are fiercely fighting against.

FSU Greeks self-identify as Pontics to designate membership of the FSU Greek community in Greece.²⁰⁸ They use the term ‘Pontic’ without much reference to the native Pontic population. I came to understand this after failing several times to make myself clear when I asked my FSU Greek informants about their relation with Pontics in Greece. Having in mind the native conceptualization of the term ‘Pontic’, I meant to ask about their relations with *native Pontics* in Greece. However, my informants started elaborating on the deterioration of personal relations within the FSU Greek community in Greece. According to their understanding of the term ‘Pontic’, they thought I was asking them about their relations with other FSU Greek immigrants. My ethnocentric and fixed understanding of what it means to be Pontic in the context of the native society initially blinded me to their usage of the term.

Apart from the Pontic label, FSU Greeks also used the Russian word *naschi* (наши) and the Greek word *i dikí mas* (οι δικοί μας), which both mean ‘our people’, to express their sense of community in Greece. In the GEITONIES survey, a limited number of FSU Greeks (n = 25) answered the following questions: ‘do you use the word *naschi* to refer to a social group in Greece?’, and, if yes, ‘to whom are you referring to with it?’. Only 2 respondents included both native and Soviet Pontic people in the ‘our people’ reference group while 6 people clarified that with the term they only refer to Pontics (i.e. Greeks) from the former Soviet Union. Three persons responded they use it for subcategories of the FSU Greek diaspora, namely the Turkophone Greeks, the Greeks from Tsalka, and the Greeks from Sokhumi; 1 person used it for all Caucasian people; and 1 person for all immigrants living in Greece.

Interestingly, the majority of respondents (11 out of 25) said they use the term with reference to all FSU nationals. After immigration to the historic homeland, FSU Greeks found themselves sharing a minority position with nationalities that formed the majority groups in their respective republics in the former Soviet

²⁰⁸ With the exception of those who are prejudiced towards the Tsalkan Greeks and exclude them from this categorization.

Union. In opposition to the dominant native group, the FSU 'others' were transformed into 'our people' in Greece. It is interesting to note that this sense of group-ness had developed without the existence of close interpersonal relations between Greek and non-Greek FSU immigrants and did not correspond to the FSU Greeks' self-identifications. More specifically, only a small minority of FSU Greeks, usually offspring of mixed marriages or persons who had strongly embraced the state ideology in the former Soviet Union, identified as 'Soviet persons' (советский человек). The majority emphatically distinguished themselves from other FSU nationals and several were also very prejudiced towards them, especially towards 'the Caucasians' (see chapter 6, pp. 155-157). According to the data of the GEITONIES project, only 5 out of the 91 FSU Greek respondents in Nikopoli described themselves as Soviet persons. As far as interpersonal relations are concerned, the GEITONIES data set revealed that the largest share (75%) of FSU Greeks' 'close social networks'²⁰⁹ exclusively comprised other FSU Greek people. Non-Greek FSU immigrants were considerably less represented in the intimate social networks of FSU Greeks also as compared to native Greeks.²¹⁰

Feelings of group-ness with non-Greek FSU immigrants were based on their common minority status. The cultural aspects that separated FSU from native Greeks, as well as their low class standing, bound them together with non-Greek FSU immigrants. This togetherness was also an actual experience within a number of institutions that structured FSU Greeks' community life. For instance the 'Russian church' in Efxinoupoli not only attracted FSU Greeks but other former Soviet Union nationals too. Native Greeks barely ever visited the church, especially after the building of the church in Nikopoli. Concerts with Russian pop stars, which are organized at Christmas or Easter by FSU Greek owners of big wedding halls, attract not only FSU Greeks but other former Soviet Union nationals too. The same went for entertainment spaces like the 'Russian' club Sabient, as well as for certain activities organized by FSU Greeks such as theatre and beauty contests. Finally, both FSU Greek and other former Soviet Union immigrants are customers of the same shops which stock 'Russian' products.

Marriage practices are another interesting instance of how the FSU 'others' turned into 'our people' in Greece. Unfortunately, I was not allowed access to the

²⁰⁹ Respondents were asked to give information regarding the most important people in their social network in terms of spending free time, confidentiality, and help. They were asked to give information for up to two persons for each category and they were also given the option to include up to two more important persons not included in the other categories. In total they could give information about a maximum of eight persons.

²¹⁰ Only 6 out of 85 respondents included non-Greek FSU immigrants in their close social network whereas 16 respondents included native Greeks.

marriage archives of the parish of Stavroupoli and Neapoli which could have provided me with a statistically valid measure of mixed marriages involving FSU Greeks in Thessaloniki.²¹¹ However, according to what my informants told me it appears that the fierce rejection of intermarriage with non-Greeks that prevailed within several closed FSU Greek communities in the former Soviet Union was gradually reduced in Greece. Anastasia, an FSU Greek woman in her early twenties from a Greek village in Adjara, told me that the main reason why her family left their village in the mid 1990s was the heavy depopulation of the local Greek population. Her parents feared that she and her sister would end up marrying Georgians. In Greece, Anastasia's sister married a native Greek and Anastasia married an FSU Greek whom she later divorced. In their case immigration to Greece did prevent mixed marriage with non-Greeks. However, for several FSU Greek men it transpired to be the reason why they turned to non-Greek partners.

Due to the stereotype of the violent and repressive Russo-Pontic and their low socio-economic class, many were treated as less desirable partners by native Greek women. Moreover, among several FSU Greeks who embraced patriarchal marriage norms, intermarriage with women from successor Soviet countries, especially those in the Caucasus, even became preferred. Those FSU Greeks represented native Greek women as excessively emancipated and not good housewives.²¹² In comparison, Caucasian women, who tended to keep a strict moral code that regulated gender relations in marriage in the Caucasus, were viewed more positively. This code prescribed values such as devotion to the domestic realm, deference to the husband, modesty in public behaviour, and premarital virginity. The latter was very important for some FSU Greek men originating in Caucasus. Although traditional norms about marriage were swiftly changing intergenerationally, at the time of my research a considerable number of first and one-and-a-half generation FSU Greek men originating in Caucasus would only marry a women who was a virgin. For that reason, several had turned to arranged marriages with women from the former Soviet Union. Given that

²¹¹ This parish includes the largest segment of the FSU Greek population in Thessaloniki. Although I was kindly provided access to the archives of the church in Efxinoupoli, I did not analyse those data since they would be biased towards FSU Greek-FSU national marriages. Many more such mixed marriages are held there due to the fact that the Russian language is used in the liturgy. At the same time, I did not attempt to access the archive of the other church in Nikopoli, though for the opposite reason. My sample would be significantly biased towards native Greek-FSU Greek marriages. As far as the GEITONIES data set is concerned, unfortunately there was no information about the origin of the partner, and the country of birth cannot be used as a proxy.

²¹² Representations about native Greek men by FSU Greek women were more mixed. In comparison to FSU Greek and Caucasian men they were though of being softer and less strict, which was treated as a positive thing by most of my informants. Nevertheless, they were also negatively represented for their habit of developing long relationships before marriage.

FSU Greek communities in Georgia and Armenia are disappearing, they mostly turned to Georgia and Armenian, or to Russian women who rejected sex before marriage.

The immigrant-native divide

Returning to the issue of the relations between FSU Greeks and native Pontics in Nikopoli, the common cultural practices that connected the two communities – such as language, belief in a common origin, and their common identification as Pontics – had not provided for strong feelings of groupness at the time of my research in Nikopoli. Concerning their relations with native Pontics in general, my informants did tell me they are more attached to native Pontics than to other Greeks. They also told me that native Pontics in general tended to show solidarity and friendship towards them when they got to know that they are *t'iméteron* (ours, one of us) – a term used by Pontic people to denote membership in the group. However, that happened only on isolated occasions.²¹³ To give an example, Ivan told me that he had been involved in a car crash which was resolved in a peaceful manner because the driver of the other car was a native Pontic.²¹⁴

It is possible that within local settings with characteristics unlike those in Nikopoli, as well as within certain institutions, strong relations and feelings of groupness might have developed between the two communities. However, my data indicate that beyond the official discourses of formal associations, a general sense of belonging to a common group was not widespread at the time of my research. It seems to have been prevented by the immigrant–native divide that separated the two communities.

²¹³ In my question as to whether they were helped by native Pontics in their settlement in Greece, my informants told me that several people were helpful during the first year, but that this did not necessarily have to do with whether they were Pontic. One of my informants even specified that native Pontics were both the best and the worst.

²¹⁴ I heard a few more such stories but the most exceptional one was narrated from the perspective of a native Pontic. I include it here despite the risk that it might feed stereotypes of FSU Greeks being engaged with criminal activities. Xenia, a native Pontic friend of mine, worked for a short period as a secretary in a car rental company. One day a gang of four young men entered the place and asked for the owner. Xenia was alone. They started searching the place and in one of the drawers discovered a gun. Pointing to the gun, they told Xenia to inform her boss that 'this won't save him' and that he had to return their money soon or they would destroy the shop and take the company's cars. A few days later they came again. Xenia, hearing one of them say something in Pontic, asked if they were Pontics. They replied positively. It Christmas time. They started singing Pontic carols altogether. They told Xenia she should not worry and that no matter what happened she would be in no danger.

For instance, the fact that local native and Soviet Pontics had similar occupations did not mean that they also had similar everyday experiences, needs, and concerns. Native Pontics are an established group in Thessaloniki while FSU Greeks are in the process of building their life there. It is very common for FSU Greek adolescents to work during the summer to contribute to the family income, while this is exceptionally rare for native Greek adolescents even of working-class families. The issue of home was also an issue that separated the two groups. Almost all of my FSU Greek informants were in debts after having bought a house, usually via state loans, or were in a continuous process of trying to finalize their *afthéreta* homes. The majority of my Pontic informants had much more secure housing trajectories (see chapter 5.2). At the same time, a considerable number of my FSU Greek informants also had to deal with issues that related to citizenship acquisition or family reunification, while most of them had relatives abroad.

Such differences are also reflected in the activities of FSU and native Pontic associations. The latter are more engaged with cultural reproduction. They offer dance and music lessons (language), organize festivals and excursions and actively participate in activities for the recognition of the 'Pontic genocide'. At the time of my research the FSU Greek associations were disappearing due to cuts in funding, especially after the closing of the General Secretariat for returning *homogenís* from the former Soviet Union. In order to avoid the costs of rent, most of them did not maintain offices and existed only on paper. Presidents and board members who continued to be active were also involved in local politics or were absorbed by other native Pontic associations, and pursued bureaucratic issues for fellow FSU Greeks in order to support their income. At earlier times, when funding was available, the FSU Greek associations were mostly engaged in helping people who were in urgent financial need, and they managed small budgets that were made available for the aid of the FSU Greek community. Some of them also organized a few excursions and language courses. A member of an association that was still active at the time of my research told me about their differences from native Pontic associations.

We take part in the activities of the federation. We put commemoration wreaths in the national celebrations of 25th March and 28th October as well on the 19th of May, when we Pontics honour the victims of the Pontic genocide. It is simply that the associations of the natives have different problems and needs and for that we have to function differently. They cannot understand our needs. Our people are in more need of help for everyday issues. Some of them do not even know the language that well. They have problems that native Pontics cannot understand.

In 2009 I was present in the commemoration activities for the ‘Pontic genocide’. In the evening there were public talks given by the major, the prefect, representatives of all major political parties, from the local Armenian community, and the minister of justice of the state of South Australia (where in that year the Pontic genocide was recognized). The public included many Pontic people, the majority of native background, and representatives of most of the Pontic associations of northern Greece. A big banner by an FSU Greek association stood out from the rest. It read: ‘The Pontic *homogenis*²¹⁵ have experienced for the past eighteen years their humiliation and the “genocide” of their Greek consciousness.’ The number eighteen was written on a patch stuck on a banner. Apparently this was an old banner that the FSU Greeks had used also in older commemorations and demonstrations. The years may have passed but they seemed to have the same worries, which did not touch the native Pontic Greeks so strongly.

Hybridity and purity

A final dimension of the immigrant-native divide that seems to separate native from FSU Pontics relates to cultural issues. Such differences also pertain to Pontic customs. Music, literature, and theatre traditions were better preserved in Greece due to the workings of local Pontic associations. However, there are several customs which were dying out in Greece, but which are still practiced by FSU Pontics. One such case is the commemoration of the dead that takes place on the day of the celebration of the Apostle Thomas, the Thomas Sunday (Η Κυριακή του Θωμά). On that day FSU Greeks tend to visit their family grave and spend the day drinking and eating there as if the dead members of their family are together with them.²¹⁶ Another custom is that of the Kurban, the animal sacrifice to a saint in the event of an importance personal and family occasion such as marriage. Kurban is also practised by Soviet Pontics in Soumela church on the old Calendar procession for the dormition of Virgin Mary on the 28th of

²¹⁵ It is interesting that in order to differentiate themselves from native Pontics they used the term *homogenis*. As mentioned, this term as deployed in everyday language by native Greeks to refer to the FSU Greeks as a short version of the official term ‘*homogenis* returnees from the former Soviet Union. Its usage next to the word ‘Pontic’, however, does not make much sense as a way to distinguish native from Soviet Pontics. Literally it means, ‘Pontic people of the same descent’.

²¹⁶ Several FSU Greeks also found exhumation, which is practiced in Greece, alien. Once human remains reach a certain age (one to three years) they are disinterred, washed with wine, perfumed, and placed in a small ossuary of wood or metal, inscribed with the name of the departed, and placed in a room. In certain Pontic villages where there was plenty of space, no exhumation was practiced. The same held for several communities of FSU Greek in the Former Soviet Union too.

August. The practice involves the blood sacrifice of lambs to Virgin Mary in the courtyard of the church. People who participate in the ceremonial sacrifice mark the sign of the cross on their forehead with blood of the sanctified slaughter and join the procession. Similar customs are practised in Lesbos Island and Thrace on different religious celebrations, but no longer by native Pontics (Georgoudi 1979).

Much more substantial differences than those relating to the preservation of Pontic customs concern the influence of the larger societies within which FSU and native Pontics were embedded. During my fieldwork I was able to assess the multiplicity of cultural differences between FSU and native Greeks. In chapter 6 I referred to the issues of spending free time and usage of public space. In earlier sections of the present subchapter I focused on the language differences which made native Pontics doubt the Ponticness of FSU Greeks in Nikopoli. Here, I provide instances that point to cultural distinctions between Soviet and native Pontics with regards entertainment.

Wedding feasts are major occasions of entertainment and socialization for FSU Greeks, especially the first generation who do not frequent taverns or bars. Celebrations are very open and the number of guests can run into the hundreds; as a result many FSU Greeks are invited to several wedding feasts each year. Obviously, the cost of organizing such an event is very high, including among other things paying for the venue, food, drinks, and the band. Overall, however, it can turn a profit for the family due to the custom of guests offering money to the newly married couple. A family friend or relative serves as a cashier and donations are made officially. Names are registered so that equivalent amounts of money can be given to future marriages of members of the donating family.

I was present at two wedding feasts. The first one was for a marriage of an FSU Pontic woman to a native Pontic man, and the second for the marriage between an FSU Greek man and a Russian woman. In both feasts a toastmaster led the celebration. Toasts were made in Greek in the first wedding and in Russian in the second. The presence of the toastmaster derives from the Georgian culture of the *tamada*. The *tamada* is a person chosen to orchestrate all feasts save the most informal. He is a respected and usually elderly person who knows most of the guests and is recognized as being eloquent, intelligent, sharp, and able to hold his drink. Symbolically, the *tamada* bridges the gap between past, present, and future. Practically, he guides the company through a series of toasts which call for downing a glass of alcohol. Sipping and drinking out of order is not allowed (Goldstein, 1999). Often the *tamada*'s words are echoed by others in the gathering in a sort of oratory contest. Several FSU Greeks from Georgia maintain the tradition of the *tamada*.

In both wedding feasts where I was present, Pontic music and dances played a very prominent position in the music program. Guest of all ages danced in big concentric circles for several hours. In the first feast the *tamada* made reference several times to the virtues of the Pontic people and the brotherhood of Pontics. The native Greek groom was also of Pontic descent. However, Pontic was not the only music played. For instance, when the bride entered the hall the band played a Shalakho tune to which the bride danced what they told me is the dance of the bride. Salakho is an Armenian dance. After the dance of the bride a number of Caucasian songs were played. In the other wedding the lezginka was also danced: this is a virtuoso dance with quick precise steps including falling to the knees and leaping up quickly. This dance derives its name from the Lezgin people in Caucasus and is very popular in Georgian and the Russian Caucasus. Russian disco as well as Russian romantic songs were also played, alongside contemporary Greek pop music and American dance music. The food offered included Caucasian and Russian dishes, such as shashlik, Caviar, and Russian sweets, while people were offered vodka or Greek white wine as drinks. As an informant told me, the choice of food in the wedding feast serves to remind them of 'home'.

I made similar observations regarding the multiplicity of music and dance traditions embraced by FSU Greeks at a party organized at a local cafeteria in Nikopoli owned by an FSU Greek. A Pontic band performed live and FSU Greeks danced, captivated by the ecstatic rhythm of the Pontic music. Equally cheerful was their later reaction to Russian disco and romantic Russian songs. Those observations made me understand Gioras's words, which I quoted earlier, that 'the fact that we are both of Pontic origin does not mean that we are the same.'

Such cultural differences become apparent not only in mixed marriages but also in the ethnic gatherings in Soumela church. The most significant difference relates to religion and results in a complete separation between members of the Soviet Pontic community and native Pontics: specifically, a segment of the FSU Greek population adheres to the Julian Calendar, which is the official calendar of the Russian Church, and not to the Gregorian Calendar which is adopted by the Greek Church. As a result, several FSU Pontics celebrate the dormition of the Virgin Mary on a different day (the 28th instead of the 15th). On that day they also practise the custom of Kurban.

I have been present in the Soumela church for both occasions, on the 15th and the 28th August 2009. Many Soviet Pontics visited the church for the procession on the 15th and, like many native Pontics, camped overnight in tents. Groups of people partied in separate campsites and there was not much interaction between the two groups, except for the night feast on the eve of the procession. Campsites

were also rather separated spatially, with more FSU Pontics camping in peripheral places in the woods, while natives stayed closer to the church.

Although Pontic music dominated, FSU Pontics also played Russian disco or Caucasian music and Greeks played contemporary pop music. Differences prevailed also in relation to language. Searching in online Pontic forums I was informed that three years earlier the use of Turkish language by Tsalkan FSU Greeks had led to an internal conflict between Pontic-speaking FSU Greeks and Tsalkans. A group of Tsalkan people had been playing loud music with Turkish lyrics from a car that was parked in the vicinity of the church. This caused a controversy. It was taken as an insult to the place by other FSU Pontics. According to descriptions in the forum, the dispute culminated in a fight which expressed the internal divisions among FSU Pontics (Pontos forum, 2006).