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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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Summary

Immigrants and natives are thought of as opposing categories in relation to their belongingness to the nation-state in which they cohabit. Although the centrality of ideologies of national belonging in structuring immigrant–native relations is generally acknowledged in the literature limited research has been done on how those ideologies are experienced and negotiated in everyday life. My study enquires into this issue by focusing on a rather exceptional case of migration, namely that of people who have always lived outside the borders of the nation, but who are nonetheless regarded as co-nationals. It is an ethnography of the relationship between two categories of residents in Nikopoli, a neighbourhood in Thessaloniki, Greece – one comprising Greeks born and raised in the country, the other also being of Greek descent, but having immigrated from countries formerly belonging to the Soviet Union and lacking any roots within the borders of the Greek state.

The largest part of the Greek diaspora in the former Soviet Union originates from Anatolia, notably in Pontos, a geographical area stretching across the eastern half of the southern coastal regions of the Black Sea. Successive immigration flows from this area to the Caucasus started from the late eighteenth century, and continued up to the early twentieth century. The immigrants were attracted by economic privileges granted by Tsarist Russia and/or were forced to leave the Ottoman Empire as a result of Russo-Turkish wars. The last major flight took place at the end of World War I, during the Greco-Turkish war. At that time, the Greeks from Pontos completely deserted their ancestral homeland. They either joined older generations of immigrants in the Caucasus, or, similarly to the rest of the Greek population of Asia Minor, fled to Greece as part of the 1920s forced population exchange between Greece and Turkey.

Soviet Greeks remained enclosed within the sealed borders of the Soviet Union, with very limited contact with ‘the historic homeland’. However, the situation changed drastically in the late 1980s when FSU (Former Soviet Union) Greeks started migrating to Greece from the disintegrating Soviet Union. Government officials conceptualized this migration as an asset for the state. They addressed an official invitation to FSU Greeks to take up permanent residence ‘in the fatherland’ and

organized a repatriation policy plan. This plan aimed at their settlement in the rural areas of the north-eastern geographical department of Thrace, home to the Greek Muslim minority. It was expected that the presence of the FSU Greeks in rural Thrace would economically revitalize the area, as well as alter its religious and ethnic composition.

The expectations of the policy makers were not met. The settlement plan failed, due to a lack of employment opportunities in the area, the inability of the Greek state to carry out the plan efficiently, and most importantly because the newcomers did not consider rural Thrace an appealing destination. They preferred to settle in the big cities. Although the Greek governments gradually reconsidered the policy goal of inviting FSU Greeks, the right of the latter to settle in Greece was not questioned. Nor was the obligation of the state to offer them what was, in comparison to non-Greek immigrants, a privileged reception. FSU Greeks remained officially welcome in 'the fatherland' should they aspire to 'return' to it. According to ideologies of Greekness that conceive the Greek nation as a trans-territorial community defined by descent and the Greek state as a refuge of this community, FSU Greeks belong to Greece as much as its native population does. However, the experiences of their day-to-day interactions with native Greeks seem to challenge this presumption.

In Nikopoli, native Greeks developed negative attitudes towards their FSU Greek neighbours against a background of limited interpersonal with them. The urban space of the neighbourhood partly accounts for the limited interaction between FSU and native Greeks. Nikopoli is a working-class neighbourhood on the margins of Thessaloniki with a majority FSU Greek population. FSU Greeks built the settlement of Efxinoupoli in the 1990s, without official authorization, approximately 600 meters to the north of old Nikopoli. Thirty years earlier, internal immigrants from the surroundings of Thessaloniki had built old Nikopoli in similar fashion. The two areas were physically separated by wasteland. They were eventually joined during the 2000s through the hasty development of the middle part of Nikopoli. This part of the neighbourhood mostly attracted FSU Greeks, although a considerable number of natives also moved there; yet interaction remained limited, hampered by the lack of a neighbourhood centre and of local institutions that could have stimulated social life and induced interaction. Interaction was further constrained by diverging attitudes towards leisure and out-of-house activities. FSU Greeks made extensive use of the public space of the neighbourhood, while the natives preferred to frequent in local cafeterias and taverns or spent their leisure time outside the neighbourhood altogether.

Native Greek's negative attitudes about the FSU Greeks in Nikopoli were mostly inferred from stories heard from others, usually concerning the FSU Greek's alleged aggressiveness and delinquent behaviour, or were supported with reference to how they saw them use the neighbourhood's public spaces. Many native Greeks criticized the FSU Greeks' habit of drinking in the street. Moreover, they passed negative

comments on the leisure shacks FSU Greeks erected in proximity to their homes and also further afield, in the plentiful free space of the neighbourhood. These unauthorized constructions, made from all kinds of material (wood, sheet iron, cardboard), brought together the elderly FSU Greeks, who spend much of their days there. From the perspective of the natives, these shacks aggravated the already degraded built environment of Nikopoli and were an indication of what they perceived as the refusal of their FSU Greek neighbours to adapt.

Most native Greeks felt that they were separated from FSU Greeks by a cultural gap. In their view it was this gap, and what they claimed to be the FSU Greeks' sullen attitude and lack of manners, that prevented their intermingling. Many native residents were also critical about FSU Greeks speaking Russian and other non-Greek languages. It made them doubt their Greekness. The dispersion of the Greek diaspora in the former Soviet Union, its lack of any institutional organization, and the importance of the Russian language as a vehicle for social mobility, had contributed to the gradual loss of the mother tongue of most FSU Greeks. Moreover a considerable segment of the Greek populations in the former Soviet Union spoke Turkic languages. Although the vast majority of FSU Greek migrants have learned Modern Greek (with the exception of a few of the elderly), their Russian language skills are usually more developed than their Greek and Russian is their preferred language of communication with peers.

In the opinion of native Greeks in Nikopoli, most of the immigrants in the neighbourhood claiming Greek descent aren't Greeks at all. The native residents mostly called FSU Greek in Nikopoli 'Russo-Pontics', 'Russo-phones', or simply 'Russians'. The words 'Russians' and 'Russo-phones' were used synonymously as generic labels to refer to people of various FSU nationalities rather than Russians per se. 'The Russo-Pontic' is a rather dubious label. As opposed to 'the Russian', it was occasionally evoked (in a positive manner) to discern the Greek from the non-Greek FSU immigrants. However, most commonly it was used as an all-inclusive label for the whole Russian-speaking community in the neighbourhood in expressing doubt about their Greekness.

The Russo-Pontic label is also widely used by native Greeks outside the neighbourhood. It was originally employed as a term to distinguish the Pontics who immigrated from the former Soviet Union from the 'native-Pontics' who settled in the country with the 1920s forced population exchange between Turkey and Greece. However, the label gradually acquired a pejorative meaning. Depending on the context in which it is used, it may signify a low class standing and indicate doubt about the Greekness of the categorized. Furthermore, in its more common usage, it embodies the stereotypes of the FSU immigrants' alleged aggressiveness and criminality.

The assessment of native Greeks of their FSU Greek neighbours was mediated by this negative public opinion of the Russo-Pontics. 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 minimal reasons. Nikopoli had not attracted much media attention and was not represented as a notorious district by local and national media. However, several native residents characterized their neighbourhood as an unsafe area because of the many FSU Greeks living there. In my talks with people living in adjacent areas, I noted that such ideas were widespread there too. Natives of Nikopoli and its adjacent neighbourhoods connected information about 'a Russian mafia' in the city, widely circulated in the press, with the category of 'the Russian' or 'the Russo-Pontic', and projected this onto the local FSU Greeks.

The negative attitudes of a large segment of native residents in Nikopoli about their FSU Greek neighbours, whose Greekness they questioned, were in contrast to the positive presentations of FSU Greeks by politicians and the media as fellow nationals coming home. This contrast points to the complex role played by ideologies of national belonging in immigrant-native figurations. To account for this complexity, I developed a theoretical framework that draws from Elias and Scotson's established and outsider model (1994/1965) and Hage's notion of practical nationality (2000), and used this to explore how immigrant-native relations unfold through a contestation over defining the nation and who belongs to it.

According to this theoretical framework, immigrants are turned into outsiders as soon as they cross national borders and start building their life abroad, away from their previous 'national home'. In most cases they lack citizenship, which formally attests their outsider position and blocks them from equal participation in the 'host' society. Their outsider's status is also experienced in their everyday interactions with members of the native society. Even if citizenship rights are acquired this does not necessarily bring about their acknowledgment as equal members of the national community by the established - those citizens who consider themselves as representing the national core group.

The established natives assume a managerial role in relation to what they imagine as 'their nation'. They feel they have the right to decide 'how things work here' and 'who should get what'. The arrival of immigrants is perceived as ruining their cultural intimacy (Herzfeld, 2005) and challenging their exclusive control over 'their' place (see Blumer, 1958). Newcomers are seen to be entering what they conceive as their collective private space and they feel they have to discipline them according to the 'rules of the house'. Natives ascribe an established position to themselves, due to their ability to present themselves as the norm by which immigrants have to abide. They ask immigrants to prove their belongingness by attesting the *practical nationality* they have accumulated, i.e. the sum of nationally sanctified and valued

social and physical cultural styles and dispositions they have accumulated (Hage, 2000). Disciplining or excluding them is necessary for keeping their status as the masters 'in their own nation'. In view of this theory, how should we assess the negative views of native Greeks in Nikopoli about their FSU Greek neighbours and how can we explain the fact that they doubt their Greekness? What would one expect the reaction of the Soviet Greeks to be?

Contrary to the rather strong views that most of the native residents held regarding their FSU Greek neighbours, the latter hardly expressed any opinion about the native Greeks in Nikopoli. When explicitly asked, they would comment either that they do not know any natives from Nikopoli or that they only have formal relations with a limited number of people. They generally described those relations as friendly. From my conversations with FSU Greeks I concluded that they were not aware of the negative views expressed by a considerable segment of the native residents in Nikopoli. Nevertheless, their rather neutral attitude towards their native neighbours did not reflect their opinions about Greece and native Greeks in general. They were very aware of, and vexed about, the negative way native Greeks talk about the Russians or the Russo-Pontics in Thessaloniki. It was just that they did not connect such a negative discourse with the locals in Nikopoli.

Moreover, they were very outspoken and critical about their reception by the Greek state. Migration to the fatherland had not provided FSU Greeks with the easy and socio-economically secure living conditions they expected to find in Greece. On the contrary, the majority of FSU Greeks found themselves working in insecure and poorly rewarded jobs that did not match their skills and educational backgrounds. FSU Greeks expressed feelings of bitterness towards their historic homeland for their precarious socio-economic situation. Their disillusionment was particularly acute due to their earlier idealized perceptions of a 'return to the fatherland'.

Concerning their attitudes about native Greeks, at the time of my research FSU Greeks could be roughly divided in two groups: those who were also critical towards their own community, claiming that 'their people' are partly or mostly responsible for the unfavourable image native Greeks attributed to them, and those who put all the blame on native Greeks, accusing them collectively of arrogant and disrespectful behaviour. The division reflected a polarization within the FSU Greek immigrant population over what should be their strategies in Greece and over different reactions to native accusations about the supposed extended criminality within their community and their alleged aggressive attitude.

The more negative group of FSU Greeks claimed that natives are soft, lazy, and ignorant and criticized extended relationships with them as signs of assimilation. Negative experiences of interaction with native Greeks and most importantly in-group discussions reproducing such experiences re-activated their strong minority culture in Greece and mobilized attitudes of resistance 'to become like them'. Most

of my FSU Greek respondents were critical of such attitudes. They claimed that these lock them in an unprofitable contestation with the natives and do not help their community progress in Greece.

Yet despite their differences, all FSU Greeks fiercely opposed the Russo-Pontic label; they favoured being called 'Pontic' or 'Greek', and indeed demanded this. This was because the label directly questioned the privileges conferred on their repatriate status, and also because it set them apart and assigned them once more a subordinated minority status. Underlying the decision of virtually all FSU Greeks to migrate to the fatherland was the expectation that there they would eventually be able 'to live among co-ethnics and be accepted by their own people'. Although they soon downscaled the initial high hopes for economic betterment 'in the West', that did not mean that they were also willing to tolerate disrespectful attitudes from the native society that put them in an inferior social position. Being called Russo-Pontics or simply Russians was completely unacceptable to them and they did not leave slurs on their origin unchallenged.

Without underplaying their Greekness, FSU Greeks selectively referred to their experience as subjects under the former Soviet Union as a source of pride and a means to challenge the degrading attitudes of native Greeks towards them. Rather than positing themselves as candidate members of the nation and seeking acceptance by renouncing their Soviet past, FSU Greeks asserted their difference in order to underline their superiority. In that context they claimed they are more Greek than the natives, since they had kept their nationality despite the persecutions endured in the former Soviet Union.

FSU Greeks in Nikopoli did not hide the influence of their upbringing in the former Soviet Union, and nor were they willing to change their habits if those appeared foreign to native Greeks. They saw no reason to do so, despite the fact that native Greeks expected them to act in that way. Drinking beers on the street with friends, watching Russian television, speaking in Russian, and building leisure shacks were not meant to be public statements but were practices aimed at rebuilding the past in the present. It was the natives who viewed those practices as provocative and disrespectful, as evidence of a lack of willingness 'to integrate' and of the FSU Greeks' supposedly false Greek descent. Native Greeks placed FSU Greeks, like other immigrants, in the category of the national outsiders. So categorized, they expected them to show their willingness to fit in and demonstrate their practical nationality.

It is hard to tell which group is the dominant one in Nikopoli. Natives claimed such a status by questioning the behaviour of the immigrants. They held that their ways are the norm by which others have to abide. However, the FSU Greeks did not act accordingly. The negative attitude of the native Greeks towards the FSU Greeks may be partly understood as a spin-off from their disappointment at their inability to discipline them according to the dominant norms of conduct.

Native Greeks in Nikopoli suspected the local FSU Greek population of consisting in large measure of 'false Greeks', i.e. non-Greeks immigrants who acquired their papers through fraud. Cultural difference was thought of as expressing the supposedly 'non-Greek consciousness' of FSU Greeks and was taken as proof of their lack of actual Greek descent. The 'false Greeks' formed an imagined category that accommodated the negative attitudes of the natives about the local FSU Greeks without challenging either the official criteria of national belongingness or the dominant perceptions about the qualities of Greekness. These were important for the self-image of the native residents. Their claimed collective charisma (Elias, 1998; Elias & Scotson 1994) depended on them.

Native residents used the alleged false Greekness of FSU Greeks in Nikopoli to justify their negative attitudes about them. Simplistically, the dominant idea can be articulated as follows: they are not nice neighbours so they can't be Greek/they are not Greek, that's why they are not nice neighbours. Through a selective attribution of 'good characteristics' to 'true Greek' immigrants and bad characteristics to 'false Greeks', the evocation of the 'false Greek' category not only secured the ideologies of Greekness and native Greeks' collective charismatic beliefs but even helped reinforce them.

On their part, FSU Greeks did not claim a dominant position in the neighbourhood by questioning the behaviour of others. Yet they did act as an established group; they appeared to be leading a life in Nikopoli according to their own norms, completely unaffected by how local native Greeks expected them to behave. Aided by their numerical dominance in the neighbourhood, FSU Greeks were capable of developing their own institutions.

However, Nikopoli is a special case due to the concentration of the FSU Greeks there. It is an FSU Greek island within a native Greek sea. Outside the neighbourhood, many FSU Greeks had different experiences. Several of my informants described situations in which they felt the need to defend or legitimate their deviance from native norms and felt embarrassed about their origin in the Soviet Union or their inability to speak proper Greek. Although to a lesser degree than other immigrant categories, FSU Greeks are affected by native judgments in the different fields of social life. The mere existence of the prejudicial category of the Russo-Pontic and the fact that FSU Greeks feel the need to react to it proves that despite their official inclusion by the state and their favourable depiction in the media, they do not yet number among established nationals.

The idea of a 'national people' is a historical construct and as such its content is an object of struggle. In time, through processes of boundary shifts, groups of people who would earlier be considered as outsiders enter the erstwhile exclusive national club. However, those are long-term processes that span more than one generation. In

the short run, immigrants usually have limited abilities to alter the ideologies of national belonging to their advantage. As a result, their behaviour is judged by the degree of their compliance with the native norms and their frame of reference commonly comprises other groups with which they compete for national recognition. Immigrants are endowed with different material and symbolical resources that help them resist the pressure exerted by the native society. However, this ability is limited. In many social settings, most immigrants, even those who are officially defined as members of the nation, are put in a disadvantaged position, having to defend or legitimate their perceived deviance from native norms.

Assimilation theory has been rightly criticized for assuming the stand-point of the nation state (Wimmer & Schiller 2002; Favel 2003; Waldinger, 2003). It presents immigrants as embodying 'incompatible cultures' posing challenges to the alleged cultural homogeneity and the social cohesion of 'native societies'. Transnationalism was represented as a superior alternative (Schiller et al. 1992; Faist, 2000), a step towards overcoming the 'container model' of society that methodological nationalism has imposed on the sociology of migration (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002). However, in their attempt to go beyond the nation state, scholars of transnationalism have tended to overemphasize immigrants' capacity for self-determination. Immigrants are not picking and choosing from among multiple cultures and identities in a voluntaristic manner, free of external forces.

The degree to which nations comprise societies and cultures needs to be problematized and assessed empirically. Yet what can be hardly contested is the fact that national societies exist in the mindsets of people. Nations and ideologies of national belonging comprise what Douglas has named a *thought world* (1986). They constitute authoritatively interlocked ideas which shape people's thinking and model their interactions. Thus, rather than assuming the nationalistic standpoint, or ignoring it as if it did not matter we should reflect on its hegemonic power in our analyses. It is only in this way that we can uncover and problematize the power dynamics structuring immigrant-native relations.