

Pontian Greeks: In search of their identity

Neither truly Greek nor Turkish, the Muslims from around the Black Sea have discovered that they are unwanted by the governments of either country

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Early last month the police arrested Retzai Yildiz at a building site in Ilioupolis, eastern Athens, as his residence permit had expired. The young student was working to earn the money he

Some youths studying in Greece, even on state scholarships, have been deported or are under threat of being deported, as they are not being allowed to renew their residence permits

needed to renew his student visa. An A-student at Panteios University, where he is studying on a state scholarship, his case attracted media attention.

The young man with the Turkish name and Turkish nationality is a Pontian, a reversal of the usual state of affairs as perceived by the general public in Greece, for whom a "Pontian" is a "Pontic Greek," or an Orthodox Christian from the Black Sea.

300,000 near the Black Sea

One of the Grecophone groups that converted to Islam under the Ottoman Empire, are the Pontians — the others were among the Cretans, Macedonians and Cypriots. If it is not true that "every Muslim is a Turk," then it is equally untrue that "every Greek is an Orthodox Christian."

"The appearance of these



'Turkish' pilgrims at the ruined monastery of Panaghia Soumela near Trebizond on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, August 15, 1996. (From the archives of Vlasias Agtzidis)

groups is not only of interest to Turkish society, which is slowly becoming aware of its multicultural nature, but also to Greek society, as it discovers that the establishment of modern states in our areas entrapped groups that were caught in the middle and forced to become part of the state whose ideological foundation was a particular religion," said Professor Vlasias Agtzidis, lecturer in modern history at Thessaloniki University.

According to their own estimates, there are about 300,000 Muslim Grecophone Pontians on Turkey's Black Sea coast.

The problems began when some of them wanted to re-establish contact with their original

language, Greek, and to experience life in Greece itself. For if the Greek State felt some limits had been reached with the arrival of the Orthodox Christian Pontians from the former Soviet Union, the presence of Muslim Pontians has disturbed deeply rooted views as to who is a Greek.

Retzai Yildiz is one of approximately 50 Muslim Pontians from Turkey who are living in Greece out of a deep desire to express their Greek identity. Nevertheless, the Greek authorities have already deported three of them — the most recent just over a month ago — and are ready to make Yildiz their fourth.

Pontians from Turkey feel un-

wanted by the authorities in both countries and are bitter that the question of Pontian Hellenism was not considered by those who signed the Treaty of Lausanne.

They face insurmountable obstacles in acquiring visas from Greek consular officials in Istanbul. They are under continual threat of deportation by authorities in Greece, where they beg for residence permits on humanitarian grounds, even when they are students with grants from from the State Scholarship Foundation.

Turkish authorities, meanwhile, regard them as a "threat to the nation."

One young man who went back to Trebizond for his summer holi-

day was stripped naked and detained for 30 days in a basement while Turkish security forces investigated suspicious moves and scheming by Greece against Turkey's territorial integrity.

Memet Karadeniz was the first Muslim Pontian to come to Greece in 1989. The creator of the website <http://members.nbci.com/Pontians>, he has established a communication forum for Pontians around the world.

"What I want to say is that I am a Pontian. We write and talk about history, and don't concern ourselves with Greek-Turkish politics, only concerning Pontian issues," he said.

He also emphasizes that he has no connection with specific political parties in Turkey or Greece. Karadeniz came to Greece on a search for his personal identity. "When you have a mother tongue, no matter which one, you want to know why that is. I don't want to create a problem for any system. Yet when you try to stop me from expressing myself, I have to do something about it," he said.

Classic response

Retzai Yildiz's name is on a list of people under suspicion as possible threats to Greece's security, a list released in a Greek newspaper under the title "160 little Ocalsans."

It shows that a sector of Greek society and Greek services regards them as a threat to national security.

Muslim Pontians' experience of police officers is that experienced by many other "foreigners."

The authorities' classic response is: "I don't care if they are Pontians, their papers say they are Turks."

If this response is due to prevailing stereotypes, there is another factor described by Yildiz.

"One person says you must be a

Gift to Hellenism

Students of modern Turkey are surprised to discover the existence of Muslim converts and crypto-Christian populations of Greek origin who have preserved their Greek language and customs, according to Agtzidis.

"To understand the phenomenon of the survival of Greek Muslim populations, one has to go beyond the prevailing perception of the relationship between Islam and Christianity," he said.

The Grecophone population of modern Turkey is particularly important, as it is one of the few real bridges of friendship between the two countries. They

are also the only remaining vestiges of Hellenism, even in Muslim form, in the old countries of the East. The appearance of Muslim Grecophone Pontians in Greece reveals a well-kept secret. Claiming their Greek identity despite not being a part of Christian Hellenism, they are thereby introducing a new element into the mix. It is the first time that descendants of the many Muslim converts among Greek populations of the Ottoman Empire — also found in the Peloponnese, Crete, Macedonia and Asia Minor — have separated themselves from the Muslim social fabric that led to the creation of the modern Turkish nation, and are claiming a separate status. In other words, our Grecophone compatriots from Turkey are history's valuable gift to Hellenism," he said.



Pontian festival in Panaghia Soumela. (From the archive of Vlasias Agtzidis)

Turk. Another, in Greece, says that you can't be a Pontian. At the point I have reached now, I simply say I am a human being."

Kara Bayram is another Muslim Pontian from Trebizond, who is studying political science and history at Panteion on a state scholarship.

The only document justifying his residence in Greece is his student ID, as his application for a student visa is still pending.

"I have been studying here for two years. What happens if they catch me? People are supportive (not because we are Pontians but because we are having a hard time). But the treatment we are

getting from the state authorities is forcing us to go public in order to save ourselves.

"On the other hand, if we come out publicly in Greece and say we are Pontians, we are in trouble in Turkey," he said.

Theodoros Angelopoulos's film "Journey to Kythera" tells the story of a political refugee of Pontic origin, who comes back to Greece after years of exile in a communist country.

A Greek, but persona non grata in post-dictatorship Greece, he ends up on a raft in the middle of the sea with Penelope, his faithful wife.

No one wanted him anywhere.