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

BY MARIA DELOTHAMIS

Early last month the police arrested Retal Yiylidz at a building site in Elefsina, eastern Athens, as his residence permit had expired. The young student was working to earn the money he needed to renew his student visa. An A-student at Panteion 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 Greco-Cypriots groups that converted to Islam under the Ottoman Empire, are the Pontians — the others were among the Cretans, Macedonians and Cypros. 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 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 entangled groups that were caught in the middle and forced to become part of the state whose ideological foundation was a particular religion," said Professor Vassilis Agiitas, lecturer in modern history at Thessaloniki University.

According to their own estimates, there are about 300,000 Muslim Greco-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.

Retal Yiylidz is one of approximately 30 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 deport Yiylidz at the hour.

Pontians from Turkey feel un-wanted by the authorities in both countries and are bitter that the question of Pontian Helenism was not considered by those who signed the Treaty of Lausanne.

They face intolerable 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 the State Scholarship Foundation. Turkish authorities, meanwhile, regard them as "a threat to the nation."

Christian classic

Retal Yiylidz'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 "166 little Ocalans."

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

Muslim Pontians' experience of police officers is that they are как many other "foreigners."

The authorities' classic response is: "Don't care if they are Pontians, their papers say they are Turkish."

If this response is due to pre-vening stereotypes, there is an other factor described by Yiylidz. "One person says you must be a 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 Trebizon, 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 visa is still pending.

"I have been studying here for two years. What happens if they catch me? People are supportive because we are Pontians."

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Theodora Angelopoulou's film "Journey to Smyrna" tells the story of a political refugee of Pontic origin, who comes back to Greece after many 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 Aegean, with Penelope, his faithful wife. No one wanted him anywhere.

PONTIAN FESTIVAL IN PANAGIA SOUNELA. (FROM THE ARCHIVES OF VASSILIS AGIITAS)