

## GPSG Working Paper #29

### *Celebrity Migrants in Greece*

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### GPSG Working Papers – Special Mini-Series Migrant Integration in Greece: Barriers to Multiculturalism

#### **Abstract**

*Greece has only recently become a country of mass immigration (it was until the 1980s a country of emigration). The paper examines the experience of a migrant celebrity in Greece: Giannis Antetokounmpo, a now famous basketball player of Nigerian descent. The main research question is whether migrant celebrities in Greece have acted as mediators between their ethnic communities and Greek society. The paper shows that as Greek nationalism is based on ethnic exclusivity, migrants tend to find significant difficulties into being accepted within the Greek society - they have to abandon their origins and, even then, people of different colour still have to win their place in society. As our case study shows sports can play a crucial role for migrants being accepted as Greek.*

**Keywords:** *Migrant celebrities, Greece, ethnic nationalism, sports celebrities.*

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## Introduction

The issue of migrants' integration in any given host society has been the focus of various disciplines and numerous researchers. Undoubtedly, a great variety of factors that condition if and with what rhythm migrants will escape the "Others" and become "Us" exist. From the number of migrants to their main characteristics and differences (linguistic, cultural, etc) compared to the host society and from economic conditions to the number of babies born from natives. As Jonathan Haidt mentions in *American Interest* (2016) immigration tends to be more easily accepted if it is modest in scale and / or migrants assimilate to core ethnic society quickly. But for the latter to happen there is also a very specific factor that plays a crucial role – the type of nationalism that prevails in the host society.

The relevant literature has distinguished between two main expressions of nationalism: ethnic nationalism which gives emphasis on ethnicity/nation and civic nationalism that focuses on citizenship. Ethnic nationalism represents the idea that states cannot be but nation-states, i.e. that there is a core nation in the geography of which a state is/must be formulated (Brubaker, 1996). Thus, citizenship is much attached to features such as sharing the same history and customs, speak the same language and most importantly for some, share the same blood. According to the above, ethnic nationalism was the basic mobilizer to the changes in Central and Eastern Europe during the collapse of the various empires there (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, etc) as it empowered a process of drawing the boundaries of the new political entities in conformity with ethnographic realities (or perceived realities) (Kohn, 1944; Shulman, 2002). Some academics (e.g. Alter, 1994) often use the term "cultural nation" to describe the product of ethnic nationalism; as each state acts as a container of one single nation there can be but only one culture, one common heritage, language, and usually religion as well as one particular "national myth" (Kuzio, 2002).

In other words, in a state in which ethnic nationalism prevails it is rather difficult or even impossible for a foreigner to integrate and to gain citizenship or when this happens it can only be the result of a process of assimilation much pushed from the state itself. Moreover, *jus sanguinis* (the law of blood), i.e. the right of any person with blood linkages to one country to automatically gain citizenship from that country if he wishes to, is practically the main condition of applied naturalization processes. The exchanges of populations between Turkey and Greece after the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), or the forced assimilation attempts of the German and the French over the people living in Alsace are examples of the way states work under ethnic nationalism – large numbers of foreigners need to be deported while smaller numbers have to be assimilated enforcing the "core nation's" customs and language upon them.

Civic nationalism on the other hand takes a rather opposite stance in the sense that it disregards culture, history and, up to a degree, language issues as far as citizenship is concerned. As Ignatieff (1993) points out, civic nations are groups of people that enjoy equal rights in front of the state irrespectively of their backgrounds and just under the condition that they have selected to join this group / state. The product of this process is a "political nation" in which everybody enjoys the same privileges and obligations and the very basis of inclusion or exclusion (from the nation/state) is related to birth or legal established criteria and procedures that are uninformed of cultural features (Breton, 1988).

In other words, in a state in which civic nationalism prevails, it is not very difficult for a foreigner to integrate and to gain citizenship. In essence, anybody can become part of the community regardless of race or colour (Kymlicka, 1995). Moreover, *jus soli* (the law of the

soil), i.e. the right of any person who is born in a specific country to automatically gain citizenship from that country if he wishes to, more or less applies.

Of course, as with most theories there are different levels of conformity in the real world. For example there is “liberal culturalism” which is found between ethnic and civic nationalism in the sense that although the state must guarantee basic civil and political rights to all its citizens, it also has to promote the national culture and language of the nations enclosed in its borders – thus requiring from the state to interfere with “cultural” issues (Stilz, 2009). On the other hand, the prescription of Habermas and Cronin (1998) of decoupling majority culture from political culture seems not to be followed by any state in the world.

Although the ethnic / civic divide has been framed on the basis of a “civic West” versus an “ethnic East” there are numerous scholars that disagree with such narrative (Shulman, 2002). One has to just take into account that one of the most multicultural states in the world that was actually formulated by a mixture of migrants, the US, abolished national-origin quotas from its immigration law as late as 1965. Until that period, and as generally accepted perceptions even after that, *real* Americans were considered to be only those of English origin, Protestants, whites and/or coming from northern Europe (Muller 2008). More interestingly, Asians were not offered the ability to apply for US citizenship mainly due to their skin colour / race (Pickus, 2009). Likewise, Nicolas Sarkozy’s statements during the 2005 riots in the suburbs of Paris, that those who participate in these acts will be immediately deported (even though most of them had been identified as second generation migrants), came in contrast with the French acceptance of *jus soli* and the identification of France as a country of civic nationalism (BBC, 2005).

As Smith (1991) points out most states are found to contain both ethnic and civic components. At specific periods of time the one or the other seems to prevail and to condition state processes and policies. This is of critical importance when one focuses on migration, citizenship and integration. In principle, when the ethnic component is on the rise then policies of limiting migration to protect a nation’s cultural integrity and rules that exclude aliens (in the racial sense) from joining the community are enforced while citizenship procedures become more strict.

The issue of race becomes of significant importance and minorities tend to be isolated, if not expelled. On the contrary, when the civic component is prevailing then acceptance of different cultures and races is enhanced as long as the latter abides with state laws and procedures. What is more, it is essential to note that in times of crisis (war, domestic secessionism, economic crises, increased flows of migrants, terrorism, etc) the civic element of the state can be displaced by a (dormant?) ethnic factor. As Kuzio (2002: 29) states “because all states are composed of both civic and ethno-cultural criteria at different periods of history the proportional mix of the two will be different”.

In conclusion, migrants are better accepted in civic nationalism prevailing countries and this is more usual in periods of “calm waters”. Nevertheless, the issue of race can be negligible even in ethnic nations if the migrants under focus can easily fit in and integrate into the “core society” wiping the trace of their racial differentiation from the majority culture. Apparently this is not an option for races that differ in terms of color, i.e. it is not possible for a person from Africa or East Asia living in Iceland to erase differences from the majority nation due to their color and other physical features. In particular, the color of the skin, especially of Africans, has been largely highlighted as a feature that evokes the idea that the migrant is impoverished and inferior to the Western culture and beauty and thus

situates such migrants in a perceived lower position amongst Europeans (Meisenhelder, 2003).

This article attempts to assess the role of celebrities of migrant origin in Greece on the level of acceptance of migrants from the Greek society. It focuses on the extreme: it assesses the changes in public perceptions of Giannis Antetokounmpo, a young person born in Athens, with Nigerian parents, from 2011 to 2015, i.e. amid a period of extreme crisis within Greece. How has Greek society reacted to Antetokounmpo's rising fame? To what extent has the color of his skin conditioned his course in life before and after he received media attention? What are the main drivers behind the overall acceptance of Antetokounmpo as Greek?

## **Migrants in Greece**

Until the 1980s Greece was being recorded as a country of migration outflows with numerous Greeks having migrated to Europe, North America, Australia and even Africa. This situation was quickly altered since the collapse of the Soviet Union and an emerging flow of economic migrants from the Balkans, mostly Albanians, targeted the wealthier Greece. At first these migration flows were considered as temporary leading to no actual reaction from the Greek state besides some deportation operations that were enhanced at times of public discontent on the volume of migrants being found in Greek territory. In fact, the first public program for naturalizing migrants came into effect in 1997, under the pressure of the great number of migrants without official papers. At the core of this policy was found the idea of providing short-term licenses that would be required to be renewed regularly, giving a sense of control over such population (Triandafyllidou and Veikou, 2002).

Following the continuation of migrant flows to Greece a new law related to migrants' integration was passed during 2005 but was much left un-operational, at least the part that talked about setting up centers for learning the Greek language, history and civilization (Article 66, Law 3386/2005).

Going further, in 2010 another law related to the conditions for granting the Greek citizenship was passed, setting jus soli as the main principle of citizenship in Greece for the first time. According to this law, anyone that is born in Greece by migrant parents who legally live in the country during the past five years is granted the Greek nationality. This legal provision was partially blocked by some legal issues that were ultimately overcome by a new law passed in 2015 by the left government of Syriza.

In general, the first wave of migrants was initially not welcomed by the Greek society though the positive effects on the economy were soon understood (although, as always, the low-skilled native population felt some pressure) and while the close racial proximity allowed for migrants to quite quickly integrate. Twenty years later most migrants have been accepted within the Greek society as mainly portrayed by the fact that they are not found under the (direct) focus of enhanced nationalistic sentiment and statements in Greece (Lazaridis and Poyago-Theotoky, 1999).

In contrast to this first experience, the next waves of migrants enclosed a significant number of Africans and South Asians. Moreover, during the last couple of years Greece has been witnessing a huge increase of asylum seekers coming from Somalia and more recently Syria as well as Afghanistan. Although these waves are quite new, the fact that the newcomers' culture seems to differ significantly from the prevailing one in Greece has

already rendered them the primary target of xenophobic statements even from representatives of mainstream right political parties.

In addition to the problem of cultural differences, the issue of race seems also to play a major role: as the new migrant population consists of mainly blacks and South Asians there are easily recognizable among the general public. Indeed, due to their darker skin they have been targeted by nationalists and the far-right receiving the title of “vromiarides” (dirty people) (Eleftherotypia, 2010). Among the most prominent supporter of this view has been the far-right Greek political party titled “Golden Dawn” which since 2012 has gained worrisome electoral power.

Overall, the issue of color has always been found at the core of racial differentiation, with darker-skinned races being understood by others as inferior. Although this is a situation that was mainly reinforced by experiences of colonialism, a part of Western history in which Greece did not have any direct participation, Greeks, as Kompatsiaris (2016) has noted, do think of African and South Asians as inferior to their race.

Quite interestingly Kompatsiaris reminds us that during the 1970s two, rather popular, Greek films, “Ο Άνθρωπος που γύρισε από τη Ζέστη/The Man Who Returned from the Heat” and “Τον Αράπη κι αν τον Πλένεις το Σαπούνι σου Χαλάς/No Matter How Much you Wash an Arapis You Waste your Soap”, gave a common racist picture of Africans – inferior and only worthy of acting as servants, serving and enjoying their (white) masters. Not surprisingly, the word “Arapis”, similar to the English word “Niger”, has a very strong negative notion in the Greek language.

No wonder that with the recent inflow of migrants of African descent in Greece (over the last decade), this population of newcomers has been found at the core of racist statements and activities (Papadopoulos and Fratsea, 2015). More emphatically, the idea of Africans’ inferiority seems to be well enclosed into (at least) right wing Greek political parties if one considers the 2007 incidence during a speech of the then Greek Minister of Economy, Giorgos Alogoskoufis, in which it was jokingly argued that an “arapis” is something less than a human being (Kompatsiaris 2016: 1). Even the fact that it was thought by a highly recognized Greek politician that it was proper to make such comment in a public speech is rather informative on part of the Greek society’s view on the subject matter.

Now add to the above the fact that the new waves of migrants and asylum seekers are occurring during a period under which Greece is experiencing a huge financial as well as political crisis spurred by the global financial crisis of 2007-8 and the subsequent debt crisis. With everyone to blame for this situation, it is not strange that even center right political parties, also pressured by the rise of nationalistic sentiment across Greece, have tried to capitalize it via accepting part of the nationalistic agenda.

Hence, it did not come as a surprise that during a 2012 a wall of 10.5 kilometers was built along the Greece-Turkey border while several detention centers were constructed to hold illegal migrants as well as asylum seekers (Proto Thema, 2012). Interestingly, in a 2011 opinion poll, 6 out of 10 respondents responded positively to the construction of the wall *in order to keep illegal migrants outside Greek territory* (Kathimerini, 2011).

### **The Antetokounmpo case**

Within this framework, a Greek basketball player, Giannis Antetokounmpo, has managed to reshape the main image Greeks have about Africans. Giannis Antetokounmpo was born in

December 1994 in Sepolia, a poor suburb of Athens, Greece. His family came to Greece in 1992 and all apart from his oldest brother (he has four brothers) live in Athens.

As he has mentioned in various interviews, he had a rather difficult childhood as his family was rather poor and could not always afford to cover even basic needs. Along with his other brothers he had to resort to acting as street vendor to support the family's income. As with a great number of Africans, Giannis periodically sold sun glasses, bags and watches to earn some income. Interestingly, one of Golden Dawn's main "political" activities was spotting such vendors (who are usually operating illegally) and bullying them.

Contrary to racist comments from the far-right and in some instances mainstream right Greek political actors, Antetokounmpo's parents selected to register all their children in Greek schools and give them Greek names. In addition, none of them received the Nigerian nationality although they could have, and even though the legal framework for migrants' children born in Greece, as described above, was ambiguous. Moreover, when Giannis was still a student he was selected to hold the Greek flag during one of the Greek national holidays, a high honor given to just one student in every school each year. In essence, the Antetokounmpo family selected to abandon their origins and integrate as much as possible within the Greek society.

Discovered by basketball coach Spyros Veliniatis, Giannis' talent in basketball was much appreciated and prior to finishing high-school he started playing initially at a local team titled "Tritonas" and then to A2 (second league in Greek basketball) team titled "Filathlitikos". As his skills grew so did his popularity, thus being easier for Spanish 1<sup>st</sup> league basketball team "Zaragoza" to spot him and offer a good contract.

As with other migrants' children born in Greece, Giannis did not enjoy the benefit of Greek nationality or citizenship. Dealing with a legal system that is very reluctant towards granting naturalization and citizenship, Giannis' future legal status in Greece after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday seemed uncertain. Moreover, the then Greek Prime Minister, Antonis Samaras, was utilizing the nationalistic agenda and political initiatives towards illegal migrants aiming at political gains. As only 10% of Greeks agreed that "having an increasing number of people of different races in your country makes it a better place to live", policies to render coming and integrating in Greece more difficult for migrants were gaining supporters (Economist, 2016).

Interestingly, Giannis received the Greek nationality, against all odds, in May 2013. He was actually received by Antonis Samaras at the Prime Minister's office in a small event that was highly publicized. How was this possible? What changed and Giannis and his parents from illegal migrants became a family worth being received from a politician not known for his pro-migrant agenda?

The answer lies on the fact that 12 days previously, Giannis had participated in the NBA drafts, did extremely well, and on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July of the same year signed a contract with Milwaukee Bucks. The previously unknown child from Nigeria, the alien for a lot of Greeks, was selected to play at NBA, the greatest basketball league in the world, something than none other Greek basketball player has achieved (Falcous and Maguire, 2005). Such a development in a country that loves basketball and that has found itself in a situation of hurt national pride, any form of national success was more than welcome.

Thus event though Greeks tended to view Africans as aliens and Golden Dawn's head, Nicos Michaloliakos, was calling for the arrest of Antetokounmpo's family outside the Prime Minister's residence and their internment to the illegal migrants detention camps, Giannis

overnight became unquestionably Greek. His excellent Greek, the fact that he had not received the Nigerian nationality as well as that he was Christian (as also portrayed by his mother holding the Virgin Mary's icon given as a present by Mr. Samaras) instantly supported his image as Greek. The fact that he was holding the Greek flag during the NBA drafts was without a doubt the change maker: he was declaring his victory in this tough selection process as a Greek one. And as Samaras pointed out in his welcoming speech "I want to thank you that *you honor our national colors*" (Skai.gr, 2013).

With Giannis joining the Greek national basketball team the overall process of him being registered to the hearts of Greeks as one of their own seems to be becoming fulfilled. After all, the desire to see the national team win, bringing about national pride is a rather strong mechanism that can, as witnessed by Giannis case, overcome the 'skin colour factor' (Falcous and Maguire, 2005). To be fair this has already been partly achieved by another Greek basketball player, Sophocles Schortsianitis, who has joined the Greek national team, the only difference being that Schortsianitis' father is Greek and thus was more accepted even from the start than Giannis was.

Gradually, strengthened by sentiments of national pride, Greeks came to acknowledge Giannis as one of them. Every time Giannis had a good game in the NBA league Greek newspapers would immediately report it. Likewise, his support to the Greek team was a media event. The fact that both Giannis and his younger brother, Thanasis, joined the Greek army again strengthened their image as ordinary Greeks. Even the far-right political spectrum in Greece seems to have chosen to withdraw from this fight – initially it would not accept Giannis as a Greek as it has not done with Schortsianitis (his two parents have to be Greek and belong to the European race – according to Golden Dawn) while it would compare him with a chimp (Ellinas 2015). Now even the popular far-right newspaper "Target" would be more respectful to the Antetokounmpo brothers giving more balanced information within its articles (even though the headlines still maintain some negative perspective towards them).

The story of Antetokounmpo partially resembles that of Hiddink in South Korea. Although Hiddink was South Korea's national football team coach (and not a player) and he was not born in South Korea or applied for nationality, he represents a figure that gained, through his *achievement in sports* the acceptance of a rather close and at times nationalistic society up to the level that he was awarded honorary national citizenship (Lee et al, 2007).

Guus Hiddink managed to win the hearts of the South Korean society and was accepted as one of them based on the pride he brought to them. As with Giannis case, the alien in the host society instantly became a national due to the national pride he provided – it seems that even extreme nationalists cannot argue against such development.

In essence, Giannis Antetokounmpo has overpassed one of the strongest obstacles to gaining acceptance within the Greek society – that of the different from the majority of the Greeks color of his skin. Moreover, as Kompatsiaris puts it as he is becoming a national celebrity with his success he is bringing about a "forced renegotiation of the binary between 'Greekness' and 'blackness' within the public sphere" (Kompatsiaris, 2016: 3).

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