

**ARTICLE**

# Ethnic return migration, exclusion and the role of ethnic options: 'Soviet Greek' migrants in their ethnic homeland and the Pontic identity

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**Abstract**

Drawing on ethnographic research, this paper explores the reasons why and the processes through which the Greeks from the former Soviet Union altered their self-identification after migration to their ethnic homeland. Responding to their labelling by the native Greeks and the doubts expressed about their Greekness, most introduce themselves as Pontians, even though the area of Pontos was not a marker of identification for them in the Soviet Union. They do so to express their felt experience of otherness in Greece and to claim their belongingness in the Greek nation. Exploring this case of ethnic return migration, the paper shows how migrants select among available ethnic options and redefine them, to assert their desired identities and strive for inclusion. In so doing it highlights the situational and processual character of ethnic identification, which should not be treated as a direct function of one's descent and culture. At the same time, it shows the constraining role of available ethnic options delimiting this process. Ethnic labels are not empty vessels. They carry particular significations that make them appealing or foreign to different migrant categories and also define the discursive and performative

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limitations in their ability to claim them and gain national acceptance.

#### KEYWORDS

ethnic options, ethnic return migration, ethnicity, ethnicity and performativity, everyday nationalism/nationalism from below/local nationalism, Greece, migration, national belonging, Pontic identity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: THE GREEK DIASPORA IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AND THE PONTIC IDENTITY

The Greek Diaspora in the former Soviet Union comprised a widespread population with diverse origins. For analytical reasons, one may discern four categories. First, the Crimean Greeks, most likely descendants of Byzantine colonists, who were granted privileges by Catherine II in late 18th century to relocate in Mariupol, in the Azov Sea region (Hasiotis, 1997). There, they were joined by other Greeks migrating from Anatolia and the Greek peninsula to the newly annexed Russian lands. Second, we may discern the Greeks originating from the Erzurum Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire, in eastern Anatolia. The 'Erzurum Greeks' fled their land and resettled in central Georgia at the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829 following the withdrawal of the advance guard of the Tsarist troops (Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, 1991). The third and most populous group comprises the *Pontic Greeks* who immigrated or were forced to leave from different areas of the Pontic lands. Pontos derives from Ἐφξινος Πόντος (Ἐφξεινος Πόντος) the (ancient) Greek name for the Black Sea. It denotes a geographical area across the eastern half of the southern coast regions of the Black Sea, defined to a large extent by its Alps. It is also a meaningful historical category within Greek historiography, an integral part of the history of the Greek nation cited as an example of its unbroken continuity (Sideri, 2006, p. 234).

The Greeks of Pontos left their place of origin in successive waves from the mid-19th century until the tragic events during and after First World War. In that period, they completely deserted their ancestral home either fleeing to Russia and joining earlier Pontic migrations or being permanently expelled to Greece as part of the forced population exchange that followed the Greco-Turkish war. A very large segment of the Pontic Greek population perished as victims of labour battalions, deportation, massacres, diseases and hardships on their way to Russia and Greece or was killed in guerrilla conflicts (Samouilidis, 2002).<sup>1</sup> In the former Soviet Union, the Pontic Greeks were dispersed in Southern Russia and Western Georgia as well as in Central Asia where they were deported during the 1949 Stalinist persecutions (Hasiotis, 1997). In Central Asia, they were joined by the members of the Greek communist party who fled to Tashkent after the defeat of the Leftist forces in the Greek Civil War in 1949, the so-called 'political refugees' (πολιτικοί πρόσφυγες). We may conventionally treat this group as a fourth category.

In the former Soviet Union, Pontos was not a marker of identification for the people who traced their origin in this area (Popov, 2010). They and other people of Greek descent were brought up to think of themselves as Greeks within the Soviet nationalities model. They called themselves *Romii* or *Urum*,<sup>2</sup> depending on whether they spoke Turkic or Greek languages or used *Greki*, their formal Russian ethnonym. Former Soviet Union Greeks (FSU Greeks) became familiar with the Pontic identity as a separate, albeit Greek identity when they immigrated to Greece after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Popov, 2004; Pratsinakis, 2013; Voutira, 2006).

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in a neighbourhood in the outskirts of Thessaloniki, this paper aims to explain the reasons why and the processes through which FSU Greeks 'became Pontians' in Greece. It highlights how FSU Greeks use different narratives of 'Ponticness' to claim their rightful belongingness in Greece, while preserving a separate identity from the native society. In so doing it explores how migrants shape their identity by

<sup>1</sup>In this turbulent period approximately 25% of the total Ottoman populations perished (Clark, 2006).

negating certain externally imposed ethnic labels and selectively adopting and redefining other ones, which may be available to them, in their attempt to assert their desired identities and strive for national recognition. It further explores the performative limitations of this process and highlights not only the enabling but also the constraining role of ethnic options available to migrant categories.

## 2 | DIASPORA HOMECOMINGS, CULTURAL MARGINALIZATION AND THE EVERYDAY POLITICS OF NATIONAL BELONGING

The massive outmigration of Greeks from the former Soviet Union is just one instance of the steep increase of emigration from this region after the collapse of the Soviet regime. The transition policies, the unfavourable socio-economic conditions and the political instability during the 1990s worsened dramatically living conditions and triggered population outflows of nearly unparalleled volume (Shevtsova, 1992). Within this wider scheme, the ethnic element played a crucial role in determining the volume, origins and direction of migration flows. In large measure, early post-Soviet population outflows concerned migrations of ethnic affinity, that is, of persons moving to their putative ethnic homelands (Münz & Ohliger, 2003).

Members of various ethnic minority groups were 'pushed' by the economic and political crisis but also deteriorating interethnic relations against the backdrop of rising ethnonationalism in their places of residence. At the same time, they were 'pulled' by a desire to move to 'their true homelands,' the places to which they thought they belonged and where they hoped to find their roots and progress socioeconomically (Brubaker, 1994; Voutira, 2011). Especially for the FSU Greeks, as well as the other non-indigenous 'nations' such as the FSU Germans, Jews and Finns, their ethnic origin linked them to the 'Western World' and entitled them to a privileged reception. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, this access to the 'West' was particularly desired.

Kin states facilitated the 'return' and settlement of their FSU diasporas through preferential immigration policies and nationality laws (de Tinguy, 2003; Joppke, 2005).<sup>3</sup> This preferential treatment was related to notions of solidarity towards co-ethnics and the need to provide them protection at turbulent times. It was further justified on a perceived 'moral duty' towards their diasporas who had endured sufferings and were discriminated against abroad due to their descent. Implicit, but equally important, were also expectations of the supposed co-ethnic migrants' easier assimilability to the 'home' societies. In line with those expectations, kin state governments in countries such as Latvia, Israel, Finland and Greece designed 'repatriation' policies with concrete demographic and economic goals in mind (de Tinguy, 2003).

However, the ethnic affinity of post-Soviet 'returnees' did not lead to the expected social payoff envisaged by policy makers (Hess, 2008; Popov, 2010; Pratsinakis, 2013; Varjonen, Arnold, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2013; Voutira, 2004; von Koppenfels, 2009; Wallem, 2017). Similar to other cases of ethnic return migration (Fox, 2003; Song, 2009; Takenaka, 2009; Tsuda, 2003), the belongingness of post-Soviet co-ethnic migrants was doubted in their ethnic homelands where they were transformed once again into ethnic minorities or reverse diasporas (see Voutira, 2006). In this context, everyday encounters produced tensions and mutual alienation between native populations and co-ethnic migrants as well as the development of separate identities. Feelings of disillusionment were also strong among post-Soviet co-ethnic migrants due to the significant downward socioeconomic mobility that most of them endured in their ethnic homelands.

In the concluding chapter of the comprehensive edited volume *diasporic homecomings: ethnic return migration in a comparative perspective*, Tsuda (2009, pp. 327–331) argues that the exclusion of co-ethnic migrants in their perceived national homelands results from their lack of linguistic and cultural competence necessary for their acceptance as co-nationals. This explanation however takes a functionalist view, which in line with the assimilationist paradigm narrowly treats immigrant–native relations as solely a matter of cultural adaptation. To the contrary, and in agreement with Čapo Žmegač (2005), I argue that cultural differences should not be given a causative role neither for the troubled relationship between co-ethnic migrants and local populations nor for the creation of separate

identities among co-ethnic migrants. Rather than natural resultants of cultural differentiation, those processes should be seen, instead, as outcomes of the symbolic contestation between established and newcomer populations over the definition of the nation and who can belong to it (Čapo Žmegač, 2005; Pratsinakis, 2013).

This contestation is initiated by native residents who 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.' Newcomers are seen to be entering what native residents conceive as their collective private space and they feel they have to discipline them according to the 'rules of the house.' Disciplining or excluding them is necessary in keeping their status as the masters 'in their own nation' and the psychological but also material benefits that flow from it.

It is in this context that the 'difference' of immigrants, including those of the same ethnicity, is questioned and potentially devalued (Pratsinakis, 2018). Natives ask newcomers to prove their belongingness by attesting their 'practical nationality,' that is, the sum of nationally sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions adopted by individuals and groups, and valued characteristics within a national field: looks, accent, demeanours, taste, nationally valued social and cultural preferences and behaviour, and length of residency (Hage, 2000, p. 53). The recognition and legitimacy given to a person or a group for their stock of practical nationality is translated into different degrees of national acceptance (Hage, 2000).

For co-ethnic migrants in particular, attesting their practical nationality is not (only) a means to seek acceptance but also a necessary step to meet the expectations of the native society about their rightful belongingness. When this is done successfully, it has a different effect. It allows them to become co-nationals, equals among others. However, being categorized as co-ethnic migrants is a double-edged sword as the criteria of judgement are stricter for them than for other migrants due to expectations about the behaviour and culture of co-nationals.

### 3 | RIGIDITY, HYBRIDITY AND ETHNIC OPTIONS

Newcomers settle in their destination county bringing with them their ways of living, feeling and thinking, as well as their language and all the other social, political and mental structures of their previous society (Sayad, 2004). Renouncing their way of life entails a high cost; immigrants will attempt to reconstruct their lives according to their own norms and values to the degree their resources allow. This attempt does not necessarily indicate a rejection of the native society's values but is simply an attempt to rebuild their life in their new home. Immigrants are endowed with different material and symbolic resources that help them resist the pressure exerted by the receiving society to comply with the native rules of conduct.

Co-ethnic migrants in particular, being more resourceful in symbolic terms, due to their ethnic affinity to the receiving society, and often in substantive terms too, due to their official recognition as *de facto* part of the receiving society through citizenship rights, may be less eager to comply with the native rules of conduct (Pratsinakis, 2014). This makes them appear as culturally foreign in the eyes of the natives who often discredit them as ethnically inadequate or even outright false nationals (Pratsinakis, 2017). As a reaction, some try to fit in and conceal their difference from the native population in their ethnic homelands (Wallem, 2017). Others choose to distance themselves from the identities of their ethnic homeland, positively reappraising their cultural affinities to their country of birth from which they emigrated (Dornseifer-Seitz in von Koppenfels, 2009; Song, 2009; Tsuda, 2003). The majority, however, is characterized by feelings of cultural and ethnic in-betweenness (Hess, 2008; Pratsinakis, 2013; Takenaka, 2009; von Koppenfels, 2009). Yet in practice, they find it difficult to express those feelings in the form of mixed, hybrid identities because in their ethnic homelands their natal and ethnic homeland identities are often thought of as incompatible or even antithetical. This makes it difficult, for instance, for FSU German or FSU Finn migrants to maintain a German-Russian or a Finnish-Russian identity in their ethnic homelands.

By comparison, the case of the FSU Greeks is rather exceptional and particularly interesting since the Pontic identity provides for an alternative space of identification, which constitutes a different ethnic option in addition to the 'Greek' and 'Russian.' 'Ethnic options' is a term coined by Waters (1990) in her work on white ethnicity in

United States. Exploring how the descendants of white European Catholic immigrants choose among various ancestries they believe to be in their family histories while opting 'not to be ethnic' in different contexts, Waters empirically illustrated how symbolic ethnicity<sup>4</sup> (Gans, 1979) plays out among privileged groups. Her analysis, which highlights the elective character of ethnicity among dominant groups, triggered a debate about the (lack of) 'ethnic options' of racialized groups. In this context and in contrast to earlier approaches, Song (2001) stressed that ethnic minorities' interactions with others are not wholly determined by the external categorizations. She thus called for the need to examine how minority groups navigate different ethnic options to respond to their racialization (and/or ethnicization) and assert their desired identities.

Following Song's lead, this paper explores how different narratives of 'Ponticness' are used by FSU Greek migrants in their attempt to renegotiate their position and claim their rightful belongingness in Greece, while preserving a separate identity from the native society. As Clammer (2015, p. 2159) argues, ethnicity is like gender and any other social identity 'performed.' That is to say, it is not simply a given but something that has to be acted out in everyday life, both when one is asserting an ethnic identity and also when ethnic or racial labelling is occurring and when that assigned identity is contested, confirmed or negated. The paper thus further explores the discursive and performative limitations of different FSU Greek in claiming the Pontic identity.

In so doing it draws on ethnographic research conducted in Nikopoli. This is a working-class neighbourhood in the city of Thessaloniki, where I lived for 14 months in two stretches in the period September 2007 to September 2009 and also spent time during several short field trips I undertook in between and after those two periods until 2011. Data were collected primarily through participant observation in a variety of neighbourhood spaces and local institutions. In particular, I kept a detailed fieldwork diary with the observations I made and the discussions I had with people on the streets, the small parks and the open market of Nikopoli and also in local internet cafes, *tavérnas*, *kafenía*, sports clubs, cafeterias, people's houses and the local schools and the neighbourhood's two churches.

I also followed people of Nikopoli in their activities outside the neighbourhood visiting entertainment spaces frequented by residents of Nikopoli outside the neighbourhood and joined social and political events that were important to people in the neighbourhood such as the commemoration of the Pontic genocide and the Virgin Mary Soumela Pontic gathering. In addition to my chats with people in and outside Nikopoli, I also conducted interviews with approximately 50 residents and organized 10 focus groups. Before delving into the material of my ethnographic research, I first provide an outline of the recent history of the Pontic people and their position within Greece's historiography as well as the role of Pontic associations in Greece in the reception of FSU Greeks.

## 4 | THE GREEK 'ETHNO-CULTURAL' MOSAIC AND THE PONTIC IDENTITY

Two long-term counterbalancing demographic trends shaped the Modern Greek nation state from its establishment to the mid-20th century: on 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 Greek nation (Pratsinakis, 2013, pp. 25–43). Nevertheless, although much of the multicultural reality of the Ottoman past was eradicated from public space and memory, the population that comprised the Modern Greek polity before the mass international immigration of the 1990s, which turned Greece to a *de facto* multicultural society, was still characterized by a substantial internal cultural diversity. This diversity is reflected in the survival of a number of distinct Greek 'ethno-cultural' identities.<sup>5</sup>

Even within the territorially restricted first Greek independent state, the Greek population was divided into a number of ethnocultural 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 nation; one was firstly Greek, and then she/he could be Vlach, Sarakatsan, Tsakon and so forth. The Greek ethnocultural mosaic was gradually enriched through the territorial expansion of the state (Macedonian and Thracian

Greeks), while 'new' groups (Cappadocians, Smyrniots and Pontians) came to be added with the euphemistically termed 'population exchange' that followed the Greek-Turkish war in the aftermath of the First World War. The forced exchange was part of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and concerned the permanent exodus of approximately 1.5 million people from Greece and the new Republic of Turkey: 1.2 million Orthodox Christians were permanently and effectively expelled from Turkey and 350,000 Muslims from Greece.

For the 1920s Greek refugees, regional identification provided a means of orientation and adjustment, a way of creating a familiar geography out of an uncharted expanse (Hirschon, 1989). Regional identities crystallized through interaction with the native Greeks who were already accustomed to distinguish between Greeks in terms of regional and ethno-cultural belonging. It is in this context that the term 'Pontian' (Πόντιος) emerged as a meaningful category and a term of self-identification.

In the course of time, the 1920 Greek refugees and the different ethnocultural groups in Greece integrated shaping what is perceived to be the 'mainstream Greek society,' 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 questioned, notably the Slavic speakers, that is, the linguistic minority population in the northern Greek region of Macedonia, renouncing their language was forced by successive Greek governments (Karakasidou, 1997). For others, such as the Arvanites, it was tactical (Magliveras, 2013).

Certain groups, notably the Pontians, retained a sense of separate identity whose strength and persistence in successive generations are impressive. For Pontic Greeks, their identity also has a diasporic dimension: being a Pontic Greek is to claim origins in 'the lost homeland of Pontos.' As noted, in the dramatic period during and after the First World War the surviving Pontic Greeks had to abandon their ancestral home. Of the remaining populations, more than 200,000 fled to Greece and approximately 85,000, primarily from East Pontos, went to Russia joining earlier Pontic migrations, thus dividing the decimated Pontic Orthodoxy between two new homelands. The survival of the Pontic identity in Greece has been an attempt of the Pontic people 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 Pontians 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 in Greece.

A second reason relates to its historical and cultural content. Pontic Greek history is linked to the main body of Greek historiography, yet it unfolds to a certain extent autonomously from the history of the modern Greek state (from the Kingdom of Pontus, 281 BC to 62 AD, to the Empire of Trabzon, 1204–1461, and the attempts for the establishment of an independent Pontic State in the early 20th century). Moreover, physical separation from other Greek communities led over the years to the development of a distinctive culture in Pontos, manifested in their distinct music, dances and dialect. Their distinctive culture marks a clear boundary 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. Their 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 (Mackridge, 1991). 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.

However, that should not be thought to imply that the establishment of Pontic identity 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, Pontians, like any other 1920s refugee group, were treated with suspicion (Hirschon, 1989) labelled with derogatory names that challenged their Greekness. In addition, popular jokes about the fictitious Pontic characters 'Giorikas' and 'Kostikas' ridiculed Pontic people. The first generation experienced

Pontic identity as stigmatizing, and a number of people attempted to hide their origin. For the second-generation growing acculturation, upward mobility and mobilization by their ethnic associations<sup>6</sup> 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, and the Virgin Mary Soumela Church, named after the Great monastery in historic Pontos, was established in the 1950s as the religious and ethnic centre for the community in the new homeland. The 15 August procession for the dormition of the Virgin Mary serves as a commemoration of Pontos and as an ethnic gathering.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a proliferation of cultural clubs, which aimed to preserve and disseminate Pontic customs. These were in addition to the already existing community institutions and provided a platform for cultural activities and the maintenance of solidarity among Pontians in Greece. Moreover, a growing interest in the history of Pontic Hellenism was observed resulting, especially after the 1980s, in a substantial output of related publications and memoirs. Second- and third-generation Pontians 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 more so the ground of a symbolic identity, expressed and practised primarily through Pontic music and dance, and less so through Pontic dialect, theatre or cuisine.

## 5 | THE RECEPTION OF THE FSU MIGRANTS AND ROLE OF PONTIC ASSOCIATIONS

The rhetoric of the Pontic associations in Greece, which treated the Greek diaspora in the former Soviet Union as a Pontic diaspora, was unofficially adopted by Greek state authorities. That was despite the fact that the Greek diaspora in the FSU was characterized by diverse origins, as outlined in section 1. Although in official state language FSU Greeks are referred to as repatriates (*pallinostouñtes*) or Greek-descent people (*homogenís*) from the former Soviet Union, politicians in parliamentary discussions, public talks and interviews commonly refer to them as the Pontians 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 of the FSU is commonly referred to as the Pontic diaspora. The prevalence of this discourse had repercussions for the collective perception in Greece of FSU Greeks. 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.

In 1985 the International Pontic Congress was inaugurated as 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, promoting their diasporic project of getting the massacres and death marches of the Pontic people that took place in the tragic period of 1914–1923 in Turkey, recognized as a genocide. In 1994, after active lobbying and significant pressure from Congress representatives, the Greek Parliament unanimously recognized 19 May as the day of National Commemoration of the Pontic Greek genocide. In the context of their wider political mobilization and diasporic organization, Pontic associations also developed contacts with Greek associations in the FSU. Pontic associations were the first to show solidarity towards the Greek Diaspora in the Soviet Union by attesting sameness in ancestry (Voutira, 2006). Through their mobilization, they effectively pointed out to the Greek state authorities their 'moral duties' towards FSU Greeks. These same associations were later recognized by governmental officials as relevant actors in the implementation and design of policy towards the FSU Greeks (Vergeti, 1998) who after the collapse of the Soviet Union started migrating to Greece in large numbers due to fear of economic and physical insecurity and expectations for a perceived opportunity of a better life in Greece. According to a census carried out by the General Secretariat of Repatriating Greeks, approximately 155,000 FSU Greeks settled to Greece until 2000 with migration continuing through the next decade yet at a considerably slower pace.

## 6 | GREECE-BORN AND FSU PONTIANS IN NIKOPOLI

Governmental officials conceptualized the migration of FSU Greeks as an asset for the state and organized a repatriation policy plan to accommodate the newcomers (Voutira, 2004). The state policy approach was markedly different to that towards the undocumented immigration from the Balkans, which was taking place at the same time due to the collapse of the Communist regimes in this region and which was treated as an undesired development to be deterred through migration control measures. The much more positive treatment of FSU Greek migration characterized not only the design of immigration policy but also citizenship acquisition. While it was almost impossible for the Balkan migrants of non-Greek descent to naturalize, citizenship rights were being granted to FSU Greeks on proof of their Greek decent as certified by the Greek consular authorities in their country of origin. The positive reception of the FSU migration further prevailed in public and political discourses and in media representations whereby FSU Greeks were welcomed as brothers and sisters coming home (Triandafyllidou & Veikou, 2002).

However, in everyday life, the relationships between native Greeks and FSU Greeks were fraught with problems (Hess, 2008; Popov, 2010; Voutira, 2006). In Nikopoli, in particular, as I have illustrated elsewhere (Pratsinakis, 2013, 2014, 2017), native Greeks developed negative attitudes towards their FSU Greek neighbours 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. They were also critical about FSU Greeks speaking Russian and other non-Greek languages. Together with any visible expression of their culture that appeared to them as Russian, it made them doubt their Greekness. In their opinion, most of the immigrants in the neighbourhood claiming Greek descent are not Greeks at all.

FSU Greeks in Nikopoli were not willing to change their habits, even if these appeared foreign to native Greeks. Drinking beer in the street with friends, watching Russian television, speaking in Russian and developing leisure practices in the plentiful free space of the neighbourhood were not meant as public statements but were practices aimed at rebuilding the past in the present (Pratsinakis, 2014, p. 130). 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.

The native residents mostly called FSU Greeks 'Russo-Pontians,' '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-Pontian' is a rather dubious label. It was originally employed as a term to distinguish the Pontians who immigrated from the former Soviet Union from the Greece-born Pontians who had settled in the country with the 1920s forced population exchange between Turkey and Greece (from here onward Greece-born Pontians). However, the term gradually acquired a pejorative meaning and emerged as a stigmatizing label. It signified a low-class standing, embodied the stereotypes of the Soviet immigrants' alleged aggressiveness and indicated doubt about the Greekness of the so-categorized (Pratsinakis, 2017).

An interesting characteristic of the population composition in Nikopoli is that it hosts a considerable segment of Greece-born Pontians. To my surprise, despite the support of Greece-born Pontians towards the Soviet Greeks at the level of associations, in Nikopoli extended relationships between FSU Pontians and Greece-born Pontians had not developed. Except from the structural reasons preventing the intermingling of the two communities, such as the segregation of the two communities in the neighbourhood, different habits regarding leisure time spending and entertainment have contributed in preventing the development of close relations (Pratsinakis, 2013, pp. 113–136). Moreover, the discourse of Greece-born Pontians 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. While non-Pontic natives appeared more distanced from FSU Greeks, Greece-born Pontians felt the need to either defend those they considered of actual Pontic descent or deny their Ponticness and dissociate from them.

To a certain extent, this particularity in the discourse of Greece-born Pontians can be seen as an attempt to prevent their identity from being spoilt by association with the stigmatized Russo-Pontian label. For instance, one of my



Greece-born Pontian research participants, 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. 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 Greece-born Pontians' struggle to have their identity accepted by other Greeks.

However, the denial of Soviet Greeks' Ponticness by several Greece-born Pontians should not be seen as solely tactical. Cultural differences played an equally significant role. 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. Those cultural differences raised doubts about the Ponticness of the FSU Greeks, 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 Greece-born Pontians' perceptions of FSU Greeks as not being Pontians and thus as not Greeks either. It should be noted that a minority of third-generation Greece-born Pontian 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, too.

FSU Greek communities have been characterized by an immense linguistic heterogeneity (Pontian, the Mariupol Greek dialect, *Urum*, Ukrainian, Armenian, Georgian etc.) reflecting the diversity of their origins and the influences of different local populations among which they lived. However, Russian, being the lingua franca in the Soviet Union and the dominant language in education, gradually prevailed as the prime language of the Greek diaspora. In Greece, although the vast majority learned to speak Modern Greek and many of them speak also Pontic Greek, their Russian language skills are usually more developed than their Greek. As a result, first-generation FSU Greeks prefer to speak Russian to each other. According to survey data collected in the context of the FP7 project *GEITONIES* that was conducted in 18 European neighbourhoods including Nikopoli, 45% of the FSU Greeks in Nikopoli speak three languages at home and 43% of them two. Almost all speak Russian (90.3%), and the majority speak Greek (74.2), too. Approximately one in three speaks either Pontic Greek or Turkish, while a substantially smaller number of respondents reported speaking Armenian (9.7%) and Georgian (6.5%) (Pratsinakis, 2013, p. 125).

## 7 | THE MEANINGS OF PONTIC IDENTITY AMONG FSU GREEK MIGRANTS

One day during my fieldwork in Nikopoli, an old FSU Greek man knocked at my door. He did not speak 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 Pontian person at his age who was supposed to live on the same floor with me. He emphasized the word *Pontian*. The person he was searching for was my next door neighbour, a Turkic-speaking FSU Greek.

It was this incident that made me realize that most FSU Greeks introduce themselves as Pontians to native Greeks as a response to and rejection of the stigmatizing categorization of Russo-Pontians, as well as a way to distinguish themselves from them. My visitor wanted to indicate that the person he was looking for was *not* a native-born Greek, like me, but a Greek from the FSU. He did not refer to him as *homogenís*, or a returnee from the FSU (*pallinostouéntas*), and of course not to a Russo-Pontian as a native Greek would have done; nor did he use the word Greek. In his discourse and that of other FSU Greeks, the Pontic identity was contrasted to the category of Ellin (Эллини) or Éllinas (Έλληνας), Greek—or, more precisely Hellene—in Russian and Greek, respectively. The latter terms are used to refer to native Greeks, while the word 'Pontian' is reserved as a label for FSU Greeks, regardless of their Pontic origins.

As already mentioned, Pontos was not 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. Ethnic Pontians

became aware of 'their' regional Pontic ethnocultural identity and were extensively informed about 'their' Pontic history when they met other Greeks in Greece. In the words of one of them:

We did not know what Pontians 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.

In Greece, the vast majority of FSU Greeks adopted the Pontic regional ethnocultural identity to designate membership of the FSU Greek community and interestingly enough without much reference to the Greece-born Pontians. I came to understand this after failing several times to make myself clear when I asked my FSU Greek research participants about their relationship with 'Pontians in Greece.' I meant to ask them about their relations with the Greece-born Pontians whose ancestors had fled to Greece directly from Pontus. However, my informants started elaborating on the deterioration of personal relations within the *FSU Greek community in Greece*. According to their own understanding of the term 'Pontian,' 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 initially blinded me to their emic usage of the term.

The terms *Éllinas* (Greek) and Pontian are used to denote a 'we/you' distinction in their discourse, which however can be confusing if used out of context. 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 in their late thirties. 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 Pontian".' My FSU Greek hosts burst into laughter for what they 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. Calling themselves Pontians is sufficient for FSU Greeks to assert their Greekness, since Pontians are Greeks, too. However, presenting themselves as Pontians but not Greeks (*Éllines*) is tantamount to accepting what they are fiercely fighting against.

Concerning their relations with Greece-born Pontians, my informants did tell me they feel more attached to them than to other Greeks. They also told me that Greece-born Pontians would 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 mostly on isolated occasions (see Pratsinakis, 2013, p. 206). Feelings of groupness seemed to have been prevented by the cultural differences between the two groups as I was able to observe in events that brought them together such as weddings of mixed marriages or during the ethnic gathering for the procession for the dormition of the Virgin Mary at Soumela Church (Pratsinakis, 2013, pp. 208–11). The immigrant–native divide was also another important reason that separated the two communities. As the director of an FSU Greek association told me:

We put commemoration wreaths in the national celebrations of 25th March and 28th October as well on the 19th of May, when we Pontians honour the victims of the Pontic genocide. It is simply that the associations of the Greece-born Pontians have different problems and needs and for that reason we have to function differently.

On the 2009 National Commemoration of the Pontic Greek genocide, I was present in the public event organized in central Thessaloniki. The public included many Pontic people, the clear majority Greece-born and a lesser number from the FSU. A big banner by an FSU Greek association stood out from the rest. It read: 'The Pontic homogenis have experienced for the past eighteen years their humiliation and the "genocide" of their Greek consciousness.' The reference to the word genocide is obviously catachrestic in this context. The aim is to forcefully put the issue of FSU Greeks' felt socioeconomic and cultural marginalization in Greece as part of the demands of the Pontic people. FSU Greeks had been protesting against their experience of discrimination by native Greeks since the early 1990s.

The number 18 in the banner was written on a patch stuck on a banner. Apparently, this was an old banner that the FSU Greeks had used also in previous commemorations and demonstrations. Years might have passed, but FSU Greeks seemed to be having the same worries, which differ from those of the Greece-born Pontic Greeks whose main preoccupation was the recognition of the Pontic genocide.

## 8 | AMBIVALENT PONTIANS

Not every FSU Greek endorsed the Pontic identity to the same degree, though. The case of Turkic-speaking FSU Greeks is particularly interesting. As mentioned earlier, a considerable segment of the FSU Greek diaspora spoke Turkic dialects. This included a segment of the Crimean Greeks who had moved to Mariupol, who spoke Urum, a Tatar-based dialect (Kaurinkoski, 2008), and the Greeks originating from the Erzurum Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire who spoke a central Anatolian Turkic dialect (Aggelidis, 1999).<sup>7</sup> In a context of widespread distrust about the Greek origin of the FSU immigrants; Turkophone FSU Greeks found it difficult to prove their Greekness. Their effort was impeded by their mother tongue, which, according to the ideologies of Greekness, appeared incompatible with their nationality and the dominant perception in Greece that all FSU Greeks are of Pontic origin<sup>8</sup> and should therefore speak Pontic. The fact that they or their ancestors did not speak Pontic, and the fact that some of them did not identify as Pontians, appeared suspicious to native Greeks. Lelya (26), a Turkish-speaking woman of a working-class background who emigrated from a small town in southern Georgia (Tetrisq' aro) during the early 1990s, 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 Pontian. 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?

Rejection of the Pontic identity was expressed not only by several of my Turkophone FSU Greek informants but by a minority of my Pontic-speaking FSU Greek informants, too. The words of Galina, FSU Greek woman from Tbilisi in her late forties who was working in the secondary education in Greece, are indicative:

I would prefer it if they called us Romii. It would have been better. I had not heard the word 'Pontian' before. What does it mean to be a Pontian? 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.

Ponticness is lived and performed through different cultural forms such as the Pontic music and dance, the Pontic dialect and Pontic culinary tastes. People who had distanced themselves from those cultural traditions or did not possess those 'ethnic competences' felt less comfortable with the Pontic identity.<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, FSU Greeks such as Galina, who were knowledgeable about contemporary Greek culture and history and had also a higher socioeconomic status, could directly claim a Greek identity. They had more ethnic options. They did not have to highlight their Pontic descent to prove their Greekness a point that highlights the significance of class in the reception of different immigrant categories. The demands by natives that immigrants comply with the native rules of conduct and demonstrate their *practical nationality* is expressed in a much more pressing way for lower class immigrants (Pratsinakis, 2018). It is those immigrants who appear more threatening to natives. Moreover, even if questioned

regarding their belongingness, higher class immigrants are more powerful in countering the accusations expressed by native citizens. Their higher class background to a certain extent provides them with protection against native judgement and affords them more ethnic options among which to choose.

## 9 | BECOMING PONTIANS

Looking at the overall picture, however, the findings of my ethnographic research, corroborated also by quantitative data collected in the context of the FP7 project *GEITONIES*,<sup>10</sup> indicate that FSU Greeks who endorsed the Pontic identity formed a clear majority among the Pontian speakers and the Pontic identity was also very often endorsed by Turkophone Greeks, especially younger generations. 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 actively participate in significant ethnic events such as the commemorations of the Virgin Mary Soumela Church and proudly identify as Pontians. At the level of collective representations, the general associations of the FSU Greeks of Tsalka and that of the Turkophone village Avranlo at the time of the research were officially self-defined as Pontic and they were accepted as members of the Greek federation of Pontic associations.

The diasporic dimension of the Pontic identity seems to be an important reason for its wide adoption 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 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 popular 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. The original is in Pontic Greek)

Several of the research participants 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 rather inaccurate but symbolically powerful usage of the term 'genocide,' several of the research participants referred to the Stalinist late 1930s and 1940s purges and deportation that FSU Greeks had suffered as a second 'genocide' of the Pontic people. Reference was also made to the perceived 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 research participants. It was cited as an accurate account of their marginal status both in the former Soviet Union and in Greece.

At the same time, as illustrated, Ponticness signifies their cultural distance from the imagined homeland as well as the native population (see also Popov, 2010). Although FSU Greeks departed from Russia as Greeks, after settlement in the ethnic homeland, they discovered their cultural difference from native Greeks who expressed doubts about their Greekness. The Pontic identity was selected as a self-identification that indicated their felt experience of otherness in Greece while allowing their inclusion into the Greek nation.

## 10 | CONCLUSION

After immigration to Greece, FSU Greeks altered their self-identification. Although they departed from different post-Soviet republics as Greeks, after settlement in their ethnic homeland, they discovered their cultural difference from native Greeks who relabelled them as Russo-Pontians, Russians, Russophones, homogenís, pallinostoúntes and so forth. FSU Greeks had to make sense of their selves and reframe their ethnic identification in relation to those labels. In this context, most of them adopted the Pontic identity despite the fact that Pontos was not a marker of identification for them in the Soviet Union. They did so as a response to and a rejection of the categorizations of 'the Russo-Pontian' and Russian and a way to distinguish themselves from native Greeks. In their discourse, the Pontic identity is contrasted to the category of *Ellin* (Έλληνας) or *Éllinas* (Ελληνες), which they use for native Greeks while reserving the word 'Pontian' as a label to designate membership to the FSU Greek community in Greece.

The Pontic identity involves and expresses feelings of separation as well as experiences of social marginality, which older Pontic refugees and emigrants faced in the past in their attempt to rebuild their lives in Greece. Paradoxically, it is through those discourses and the re-narration of their families' past with the Pontic Greek history that they are able to make sense of and negotiate their position within the Greek nation and to put forward claims and expectations for the future. Asserting their Ponticness FSU Greeks express their felt experience of otherness in Greece while claiming their belongingness into the Greek nation. Their self-conception of the Pontic identity thus accommodates their Russian upbringing and highlights their Greekness. It forms an intermediate identity space that creates a bridge between their Russian and Greek affinities.

At the same time, my ethnographic research in Nikopoli shows that not everybody endorsed the Pontic identity to an equal degree. Indeed, a minority of FSU Greeks rejected it. They preferred the overarching Greek identity. Ponticness is practised through different types of cultural manifestations, such as Pontic music and dance, the Pontic dialect and Pontic culinary tastes. Bearing an identity, one is expected to perform it. Not possessing those 'ethnic competences' made them feel less comfortable with their Pontic identity. Importantly, FSU Greeks who had a high socio-economic status and/or were knowledgeable of contemporary Greek culture and history and were proficient in Modern Greek language had more ethnic options as they could directly claim a Greek identity and assimilate into wider definitions of Greekness. They did not have to highlight their Pontic descent to prove their Greekness.

At the other end of the spectrum, the subgroup of FSU Greeks who found it most difficult to prove their Greekness and gain national recognition were the Turkophone FSU Greeks, especially those of low-class standing. Their effort was impeded by their mother tongue and by their culture, which differ from purified constructions of Ponticness. The inability of several Turkophone FSU Greeks to perform the Pontic identity burdens in their interaction with native Greeks and poses problems in their acceptance in Greek society. For many of them the self-presentation of the ingroup as Pontians is constraining rather than enabling.

Three points need to be highlighted from the paper's analysis of the FSU Greeks' endorsement (or rejection) of the Pontic identity. First, the paper signifies the situational, contextual and processual character of national and ethnic identities, which should not be seen as a direct function of descent and culture, defined as fixed categories (Barth, 1969) but rather shaped through a dialectic interplay between the self-definitions by the people who claim an identity and the external categorizations imposed on them (Jenkins, 2008). As such, they depend on the different 'ethnic options' that are available to outsider groups which they can adapt to respond to external categorizations and assert their desired identity.

Second, identities may be continuously reconstructed and renegotiated in this process, yet this process is defined and bounded by the significations of available ethnic options. Such ethnic options are not empty vessels to which one can freely attribute any content at all. They carry particular meanings and legacies, which make them appealing or foreign to groups and people but also define the discursive and performative limitations in their ability to claim them and gain national acceptance.

This brings me to the third point, which sets out from the basic premise that self-identifications presuppose an audience and a shared framework of meaning between those who claim the identity and those to whom they address their claim (Jenkins, 2008, p. 55). People claim identities to position themselves in relation to others. Yet claiming an identity is not enough; one has also to perform it. People need to be convincing in their claims of belongingness. The validation of their performance by others is crucial in their gaining recognition as bearers of the claimed identity.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In this turbulent period approximately 25% of the total Ottoman populations perished (Clark, 2006).
- <sup>2</sup> Those are identities that predate the Modern Greek state and echo the Byzantine past. The population in the Ottoman Empire was politically organized around self-governed religious communities, the millets. All the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire formed the Rum (i.e., Roman) millet—a structure that facilitated the political survival of the Byzantine identities. The Rum millet was a multilingual community, but Greek language enjoyed a hegemonic position; it was the language of the liturgy and the Orthodox patriarchate as well as the principal language of trade and of cultural distinction in the Balkan zones (Mazower, 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> In later years, partly as a result of failed expectations, the favourable provisions for co-ethnic post-Soviet migrants were gradually rolled back by kin state government with the exception of Israel, whose *raison d'être* is the immigration of all Jews (Christopoulos, 2012; de Tinguy, 2003; Prindiville & Hjelm, 2018).
- <sup>4</sup> Symbolic ethnicity is a form of ethnicity, characteristic of later generation migrants, involving the expression of feelings towards the ethnic group through material and non-material symbols. As such, it is opposed to thicker versions of ethnicity emanating from significant social or cultural participation in ethnic groups and ethnic culture.
- <sup>5</sup> 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 and hence their categorization as ethnocultural.
- <sup>6</sup> As early as the 1930s, ethnic associations such as the *Ēfxinos Lèshi* were established in Greece.
- <sup>7</sup> Only a limited number of the Crimean Greeks, emigrated during the 1990s, and their presence in Nikopoli is negligible. The evidence in this section on the Turkophone Greeks thus concerns the FSU Greeks originating in Erzerum which formed a large segment of the local FSU Greek population.
- <sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the areas of concentration of the Greeks of the Erzerum Vilayet were in direct proximity to the Eastern borders of the region commonly depicted to have formed the Greek Pontic lands. There is very limited historical information about this group, and to my knowledge, it is not known whether they had a long and continuous presence in that area or they were shaped through migrations from Pontos and/or other areas of Greek concentration in Anatolia. Their cultural customs such as music, dances and traditional attire differ from those of the Pontic Greeks. Yet as I describe in the following section, after their migration to Greece 'Erzerum Greeks' are often subsumed as part of the Pontic people. In any case, the issue of whether they actually originate from the Pontic lands or not is of limited value to our subject matter. As this paper showcases identification with the Pontic identity, or any identity for that matter, is not a direct function of one's descent and culture, defined as fixed categories. People may expand the definition of who is a Pontic through subjective presentations of their own families' histories within given historical categories.
- <sup>9</sup> Actual origin as well as the time and context of arrival of their ancestors in the former Soviet Union also influenced the embracing of the Pontic identity by FSU Greeks. Those FSU Greeks whose descendants had fled Eastern Pontos in the aftermath of WWI had personal family stories, which directly linked to the recent tragic history of the Pontic people and were thus much more prone to relate to the Greek understandings of the Pontic identity. That was in contrast to other

FSU Greek who did not originate in Pontos or who were descendants of earlier Pontic immigrants and who were commonly more alienated from the history of their forefathers in Pontos.

- <sup>10</sup> According to the survey findings, 80% of the FSU Greeks in the neighbourhood self-identified as Pontians and the remaining 20% as Greeks. People who identified as Pontians were also a majority (60%) also among the subgroup Turkophone FSU Greeks.

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