

**The struggle to belong**  
***Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.***

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**The construction of a “public” discourse for Athens centre: media,  
migrants and inner-city regeneration**

[this is a draft version, please do not quote]

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## Abstract

Since the late 90s, diversity and difference have been celebrated as a key feature and asset of urban life. However, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a rise of ‘phobias’ of the ‘Other’ (and particularly of Muslim Others) and, at least in Europe, a simultaneous rise of far-right politics that was joined by conservative declarations about the death of multiculturalism. In this context, cities become a contested terrain representing both the possibilities of multicultural living and learning, and the places of difference, exclusion and sometimes fear. Migration and its spatialities are represented as **the ‘new’ urban problem** in European cities. Concerns about deprived urban neighbourhoods, about segregation or even ghettos are frequent and are often accompanied by statements and programmes about social mix and urban revitalisation (or even promoted gentrification).

Through the case of Athens, this paper wishes to analyse the political, social and spatial discourses that seek to reshape the realities of central neighbourhoods and the ‘common’ public perceptions about the city centre. We will examine how **the construction of a public ‘media’ discourse** (the media, the politicians, the emergence of the ‘ghetto’ discourse and the politics of fear, the monopolisation of public discourse by conservative or even far-right views) is intertwined with the **inner city revitalisation agenda**. Namely how the adoption of above mentioned discourse by the relevant ministries and institutions as a de facto reality that defined the way to address the “problems” through state-promoted gentrification (coupled with arguments about desirable resident groups and architectural competitions as remedy for “social ills”) leads to the imposition of a neoliberal agenda for the centre of Athens, through securitisation and policing. Although the case of Athens is not unique, it can be seen as exceptional or even extreme example due to its lack of actual urban or integration policies, to the emergence of the “ghetto” discourse as a tactic for urban regeneration and due to the far-right representations and actions that dominate the TV media, further enhanced in the context of the current crisis.

Since the late 90s, diversity and difference have been celebrated as a key feature and asset of urban life, although the challenges of 'living together' were often debated. However, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a rise of 'phobias' of the 'Other' (and particularly of Muslim Others) and, at least in Europe, a simultaneous rise of far-right politics that was joined by conservative declarations about the failure or the death of multiculturalism, even in countries with strong multicultural past (eg Britain). Moreover, in a context of several crises unfolding (economic, wars, disasters, poverty), a xenophobic rhetoric is gaining grounds, asking for harsher measures.

In this context, cities become a contested terrain representing both the possibilities of multicultural living and learning, and the places of difference, exclusion and sometimes fear. Migration and its spatialities are represented as **the 'new' urban problem** in European cities. Concerns about deprived urban neighbourhoods, about segregation or even ghettos are frequent and are often accompanied by statements and programmes about social mix and urban revitalisation (or even promoted gentrification). Moreover, they are used to illustrate the case of segregation or parallel societies while obscuring issues of poverty and exclusion.

As Foucault reminds us, "space is crucial to the exercise of power".

The discourse of urban governance and diversity Athens is a somehow peculiar example. However it seems like a timely example because it places concerns of urban governance and urban diversity in a context of crisis; an economic crisis this time, rather than a security crisis, as it has been done before through discussions about a post-9/11 era.

In Greece, as well as elsewhere to a higher or lesser degree, there are strong divergences between policy and practice or reality, while the processes of decision-making and the stakeholder actually involved are often hidden. What is exemplified through the case of Athens, is that dominant media public discourse has become a major stakeholder in the urban governance and transformation terrain (even without popular mobilisations).

Similarly, as elsewhere, the inter-relations among urban diversity, space, power-relations and governance processes, become evident. In the context of economic crisis, increased poverty and xenophobia, the most prominent actor that emerges is that of force (in any form). (Police) forces become responsible for safety, for immigration, for urban regeneration, for commerce, for political obedience. (Police) forces can ensure social order and security during panics or unfolding crises that a prolonged and constantly reborn 'state of emergency' may bring.

In a context of increasing poverty and socio-economic polarisation, joined by the dismantling of a welfare state, the notion of 'emergency' becomes even more popular in public discourse but also as tactic.

### **What about (glocal) urban governance and its EU-Greece relations?**

Policy-making has become something broader than a local or national concern. Especially for EU countries (but not only), national policy-making needs to incorporate in its remit discussions and directives of the EU, together with 'lessons learnt' and 'best practices'. In doing so, it also adopts – intentionally or not – a language and a discourse embodied in these multinational directives. More often than not, this policy language is simultaneously abstract and ideologically-tinted and people-friendly. Equally, more often than not, this policy language and recommendations differ from what is actually implemented or from the lived reality.

Governing urban – particularly – diversity has been a political issue and a public policy agenda for the last 20 years (at least), both in the EU and in different countries. It is also an issue that, along with that of social cohesion and sustainability, has been mainstreamed into a range of agendas and thematic public policies. This has also been the case for Greece, albeit with significant delays and even stronger

differences between policy and implementation. In Greece, up to 2009, the issue of governing diversity gets into the policy agenda rather superficially, mainly through immigration legislation and sometimes in terms of education or welfare. The current government came to power with an agenda of serious public reforms that also dealt with issues affecting the governance of diversity (albeit under the current austerity regime most of these reforms were abandoned or changed).

The latest public administration reform (Kallikratis) tries to introduce some elements of public participation and consultation that were non-existent before. This restructuring aims to establish local bodies (of mainly advisory remit) formed as partnerships among the public sector, the private sector and other interest groups (including civil society and residents)<sup>1</sup>. However, as it is often the case, their role remains largely advisory and without decision-making powers, while those that are by now established have done so with quite obscure election mechanisms. Along these lines was the introduction of the local council of immigrants, which the municipality of Athens just established and which seems to include more institutional than immigrant representatives similarly obscurely selected. Moreover, in the urban governance discourse, the issue of empowerment (of citizens, of residents, of specific groups) is quite popular and forms a particular policy concern. This is an issue that although briefly mentioned, it has and still remains out of public policies. Instead it takes place only through grassroots groups (community groups, self-organising or solidarity networks) and occasionally through NGOs (although the concept and functioning of NGOs is relatively new to Greece).

Similarly, and with greater reference to urban diversity and its governance, the issue of minimising possible tensions (mainly through conflict resolution and mediation initiatives) has become a popular one in urban or even national agendas (last decade's riots in Europe enhanced that). At a time when xenophobic discourses are on the rise in Europe and elsewhere, and when the appeal of nationalist or far-right parties is growing it seems quite a crucial issue to think (at least). Despite existing tensions, which are intensified due to the increase of poverty, the Greek response was largely to ignore it. Or, to be more precise, to leave politicians to deal with it through circumstantial announcements (rather than policies or initiatives) that respond to crises whenever these unfold. But the main responsibility of conflict-resolution is granted to the police, thus establishing a forceful 'conflict-resolution' method of repression and control. This repressive method of minimising tensions is a re-active method built on state power and violence, further legitimising dubious police practices and appealing to calls for increased safety; calls that further strengthen a securitization approach to urban affairs and to the governance of diversity while also implicitly supporting the 'state of exception' as a governance tactic.

Immigration reform was a risk the recent government took with its 'Naturalisation' law (3838/2010) which would ease the process of naturalisation, resolve the issue of second generation migrants, give voting and representation rights to long-term migrant residents and reform the asylum and legalisation institutional structures so that the overall process is dealt faster and reliably. With the introduction of this and some other relevant laws, Greece actually managed to address – at least in policy and legal terms – some of the problems it had been condemned about by the EU (as was also indicated by the Migration Integration Index III). However, implementation is slow and facing serious obstacles, while the naturalisation and political rights reforms are currently contested in the High Court as unconstitutional (by nationalist groups).

Since migrants and minority groups often reside in deprived or underdeveloped areas, urban diversity is closely related to issues of urban and neighbourhood regeneration. In the EU, there are numerous policies, initiatives, recommendations and declarations regarding urban regeneration, plenty of whom are directly linked to urban diversity. There are various contextual variations of neighbourhood regeneration policies that mainly combine spatial with social, economic and other approaches. Similarly, there is a big discussion about mixed communities (housing and social mix) and their benefits, which is also incorporated into neighbourhood policies as a key aim to be achieved (irrespective of the critique they received regarding their implementation). The discussion in Greece is rather different in many ways. The whole housing and social mix discussion has largely remained out of any agenda since it was mainly ensured through the 'vertical and horizontal differentiation' in housing and when it did get into

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<sup>1</sup> Quite similar to the UK best practice of the LSP

the political discussion it did so in terms of attracting new (namely middle and higher income) residents in areas stigmatised as 'ghettos'. In terms of 'integrated' neighbourhood regeneration programmes, although some tools do exist, they never went beyond pedestrianization, redesigning and cultural projects and mostly omitted social or other initiatives. Eitherway, even integrated urban regeneration programmes have used "policing as an urban renewal strategy for the neoliberal project" (REFS)

As we can see, there some 'tools' (ranging from discourses and political support to directives and practices) that have been adopted from a European (or actually an EU) policy discourse. However, their influence on national or local policies, besides policy language, has been minimal even when considering the new laws. This influence becomes even more minimal if one starts considering the proposed or implemented measures, since "the exercise of power and of decision-making" is taking place not only via policy-making but also via multiple and multi-level power-relations. Despite governmental statements and commitments, the mantra of transparency and accountability still seems far away (not that it is remedy on itself or that it is working perfectly in other countries), while the discourse and the claim for greater participation is implemented via e-government consultations concerning proposed legislation (which has often turned into a farce and was often biased) and via the new local councils that up to now have only advisory power, obscure membership procedures and preferential relations of their members. Similarly, urban governance remains largely centralised with local governments having limited (up to now) executive powers or budgets.

Since in the existing system 'the public' has limited options for action, there have been several attempts by grassroots groups to voice demands for greater participation, for defending (or establishing) human, social, political or cultural rights and for increased redistributive measures especially in times of economic hardship. No matter their success in local or neighbourhood level, these attempts remain largely out or in the margins of the public discourse (unless they become a movement) and of the policy-making. Although there have been some great success stories and these attempts have often managed to create parallel networks of support, solidarity and action, they remain vulnerable to governmental whims and even more vulnerable to authoritarian practices; something that becomes highly common in terms of issues regarding diversity.

Despite efforts of regulation, urban governance in Greece seems to operate still via a non-policy approach, either because policies are nonexistent, or because they are not implemented. The reactionary measures born out of the last years' events and discourses seem somehow out-of-place in the current context of the economic crisis and increased poverty, which would call for more redistributive or even supportive measures. It seems that the adopted politics of fear (national and local) coupled with an emergency discourse (national and local), instead of making people more governable subjects (Rose, 2000) they breed panic, revenge and appeals for increased security. All these, lead to an even more police-state of repressive practices that first and foremost targets the 'different'.

### **1990s: Athens as an immigration destination**

As is most commonly presented, Athens and Greece in general, became a destination of immigration in the late 80s – early 1990s, after the political transformations that changed dramatically the geography of the Balkans and of the ex-USSR. Of course, immigrant communities existed in Athens from the past (mainly since the 70s), but their population was relatively small and associated (one way or another) with the political or cultural history of Greece. After the changes in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, migration flows towards Greece – then an EU country that seemed appealingly prosperous – increased, primarily from the neighbouring countries of the Balkan Peninsula with Albanians being the majority of the immigrant population.

Either due to lack of experience (as some argued and many would like to believe) or due to opportunism, Greece developed a policy of "non-policy" regarding immigration (Alexander, 2003) and immigrant integration. That resulted in leaving the new immigrant residents of Greece without a safety net of social welfare (apart from minimum) or rights and in extremely vulnerable positions of

exploitation and discrimination. At the same time, the public discourse – shaped mainly by the mainstream media (TV) – strengthened xenophobic views that were becoming popular leading to what was termed as Albanophobia. Thus Albanian migrants became ‘public enemy no 1’, other Balkan and Eastern European immigrants were also discriminated against, while other migrant communities such as Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Kurds, Polish or Philipppines were presented as a counter-example of being relatively ‘good’, ‘cultured’, ‘quiet’ or even ‘peaceful’.

Yet, in this climate, the spatial and everyday aspects of the transformation of Athens played a rather different role. When immigrants arrived in 1989-90, Athens was already suburbanised with several of its central neighbourhoods having lost a significant percentage of their residents who followed the trend towards the suburbs. Still, a significant percentage also stayed (those that couldn’t afford to move and those that still liked the central neighbourhoods due to convenience, social networks etc), but they mainly occupied the flats of the higher floors; the privileged ones for Greek preferences. So, when immigrants arrived they mainly settled in these central neighbourhoods where building stock was available and cheap and where transport was easy. Of course they resided in the cheaper and smaller flats, namely those usually on the lower floors of basements. Athens’ dominant housing form (blocks of flats) presents what was termed as “vertical differentiation” (Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001) which was accompanied by a “horizontal differentiation” of façade or back. This means that the block of flats has an internal organisation that reflects the wealth of the owners, with the richer ones staying at the top floors and preferably at the frontal flats and the poorer ones residing in the lower floors and basements.

This “vertical differentiation” pre-existed from the major migration flows towards Greece and shaped rather mixed economic and social geographies in many neighbourhoods. In relation to immigrants’ insertion in housing, this ‘vertical and horizontal differentiation’ had two significant outcomes. First, it led to rather mixed neighbourhoods (ethnically and economically) and discouraged the creation of enclaves or ethnic ghettos, and second it facilitated a rather convivial everyday life with everyday interactions (social or economic) and immigrant insertion in local schools and social services. Neighbourhood public spaces were revitalised by the new residents who used them more, so were neighbourhood businesses. A housing stock that was in danger of being or remaining empty and found new inhabitants that also increase the revenues of the local property owners (ibid, Mantouvalou and Mavridou, 2007).

Yet, this spatial integration and the – occasional – neighbourhood conviviality didn’t imply actual integration of immigrants (Penninx 2004), since almost the majority of requirements for legal and cultural integration were missing (ibid) (for example transparent processes of residence permits, rights, anti-discrimination legislation, cultural support etc,) and exploitation and discrimination were also significant (as were the networks of organised crime that operated).

However, it was a time where the economy was – supposedly – growing so jobs were available. And despite xenophobic or anti-immigrant voices it seemed that a form of conviviality did exist – but a conviviality of everyone having or knowing its place (and for most immigrants that meant a ‘lower’ place) and extended only to the immediate social networks (i.e. immigrants are problematic but ‘my’ immigrants are nice).

In addition, there was a sprawl and a social and property mobility of immigrants residing in Athens for a number of years. Most of those who entered the property (buying) market followed area choices similar to Greeks, while despite having significant percentage of immigrant residents in the municipality of Athens, there was also significant numbers of immigrant residents in some suburbs. Furthermore, behind the ethnicity feature, immigrant communities had – and have – their own internal differences that can be economic, social or cultural.

### **Up to 2004: The ‘golden’ years of the Olympic Games**

The pre- Olympic preparation period was a period of general euphoria, economic growth and the potential of a great future for the country. The organisation of the Games released a vast amount of

international and public investment money on a variety of construction works (public, private, infrastructure, transport networks, suburbanisation, malls etc) and the whole construction sector was booming. Immigration had been the major labour force for Greece's fulfilment of its dream of modernisation and global competitiveness (Psimmenos 2004). Given the affluence of that period, the increased immigration flows arriving in Greece were widely absorbed in construction and domestic care services.

Although there have been attempts (1998-2000 and 2001-2002) for the legalisation of immigrants without papers (working and residence permits), “the strict legalisation rules in conjunction to the limited time that a residence permit was valid, reproduced and maintained a significant part of illegal migration in the context of creating a flexible labour force which was necessary for the competitiveness in a global market” (Panteion 2002).

Apart from the mega-projects of the Games dispersed in the wider Attika region, various interventions (mainly pedestrianizations and public spaces renewal) in the historic centre and around the archaeological sites were promoted. The 'improvement' of the image of central areas allowed for a number of 'clearance' operations (followed by a relevant-public discourse) against immigrants and other 'annoying' groups (homeless, drug addicts etc) that were moved temporarily to other areas of the city.

### **2004 until today: A post-Olympic failure story**

After the summer of 2004, the bliss and glamorous image of Athens was starting to wither. While Athenians (and Greeks in general) were still proud of “their success story” of the Games, the first signs of economic problems appeared (also associated with the immense financial cost of the Games) while past aspirations (and investments) about inner-city development seemed to move further and further away.

At the same time, a number of factors triggered specific changes in Athens' centre or intensified problems that remained largely hidden up to now. The implementation of the Dublin II agreement meant that migrant flows were actually trapped in transit countries (mainly South European countries) leaving migrants in limbo and without basic protection or even in danger of violent deportation in countries that may not have the capacity (or political will) to solve the arising issues. Thus, migrant presence increased – especially migrants from war-affected and poverty-stricken countries. In the case of Greece this resulted in increased numbers of immigrants from South East Asia and the Arabic countries that primarily gathered in the two major cities and in ports. Athens received a significant number of this more recent migration which faced even more problems than previous immigrants since the legal context remained inadequate, the economy was doing worse, the available living conditions were also worse since people were forced to live in whatever available cheap accommodation (often rented per day or per head) or in the streets, and the possibilities of leaving for other European countries were reduced to minimal (Amnesty International 2010). Some areas of the municipality of Athens, did witness an increase of their immigrant population who often lived in appalling conditions and were exploited by property owners, employers and organised crime networks.

Simultaneously, there was an increase of organised crime activities that also centred on specific neighbourhoods. Prostitution (including street prostitution) was on the rise and expanded in more than the 'traditional' prostitution areas; drug-selling (and using) became more visible in several inner-city streets, and it seems that other organised crime activities (such as protection and extortion) flourished. The establishment of an OKANA (a public drug rehabilitation programme) centre in the commercial centre of Athens, although extremely needed in a city with minimal provision of drug rehabilitation centres, had as a spatial repercussion the attraction of part of the drug trade to its nearby area.

Of course, and in the given context, the economic conditions were increasingly worsening, the overall poverty was increasing (even more for the more vulnerable social groups) while the state kept ignoring the social and spatial needs of many inner-city areas. This increasing poverty intensified tensions among immigrants and Greeks, but also among different immigrant groups.

From 2007 onwards, the public discourse and local events seem to push (as well as to create and sustain) towards an explosive situation in the centre of Athens.

In 2007, an article in a lifestyle free-press magazine (Lifo, 2007) was the first to characterise Theatrou Square area as a ghetto due to the simultaneous presence there of a large number of immigrants (mainly newer arrivals from more visible minorities), drug-selling and using, prostitution, homeless people (also associated with the existence of a homeless shelter) and the dilapidation of the building stock due to the flight of its 'original' residents. However, the ghetto was not immediately adopted by the public discourse; it needed a year or so for the ghetto to start becoming a popular association for specific inner-city neighbourhoods. For this, a number of factors and events were crucial.

A bit further away from Theatrou Sq. another neighbourhood came to the media spotlight: Ag. Panteleimonas. From 2007 onwards the media, primarily the TV, devoted part of its precious time to voices of local residents (as they are presented) that complain dramatically about the state of 'their' neighbourhood. No doubt, this neighbourhood faced several problems (ranging from issues of rubbish collection to problems associated with organised crime). However, the main focus of these media-ised complaints was on the existence of particular groups of immigrants in the area (mainly Afghan refugees) who were accused of devaluating the neighbourhood, of occupying the main public space and of creating all sorts of social and hygiene problems because of their existence (and sometimes culture). Thus the visibility and religious difference of specific migrants and their housing conditions (often residing in flats rented per head or were homeless), together with speculations about their criminality was presented as the key problem of Ag. Panteleimonas, which made its 'original' and 'lawful' residents "to become strangers in their own neighbourhood". The 'truth' of this media discourse was rarely challenged and neither was the residency of the specific 'residents group'. What was skilfully omitted from that discourse was the strong influence (in terms of ideology and mobilisation) that far-right groups had on these 'residents groups' and how quickly far-right parties tried to capitalise and support such groups. The publicity of these voices by the major TV media, offered a kind of legitimisation to them and their portrayed truth, turning the main square to a contested and symbolic ground between far-right and leftist groups while alienating other (and many) residents voices and while racist incidents increased (with the 'tolerance' of the local police station).

Yet another event becomes a significant turning point in the unfolding of the story of the centre of Athens: the events of what was termed as 'December 2008'. While several political actions put the 'right to the city' into the discussion and into practice and inspired various mobilisations, these events also offered an opportunity to the then government (state and municipal) to establish a public discourse based on politics of fear and to pursue a securitisation agenda of urban politics under the pretext of exceptional circumstances. This public discourse, besides turning the protesters into THE internal enemy, had three significant impacts. First, it targeted immigrants by associating them to the looting of stores, lending more support to the growing anti-immigration rhetoric. Second, it tried to delegitimise protests and demonstrations (both symbolically and legally) by claiming the 'consumer-citizenship' rights of Greeks and tourists and by presenting them as a threat to the main Greek industry – tourism. Third, it legitimised citizens groups ("indignant citizens") mainly of far-right or nationalistic associations that were calling for "their right to defend their areas" (from the protesters, the anarchists, the immigrants, the Others). This last point became highly significant for the following events in the centre of Athens and the legitimisation of far-right rhetoric and practices.

The combination of all these situations quickly brought the centre of Athens to the spotlight. From 2009 onwards, the ghetto was adopted by the public discourse as an undoubtable reality, concerning not only the two infamous areas of Theatrou Sq. and Ag. Panteleimonas, but increasingly embodying many – and diverse – inner city neighbourhoods. The legitimisation of certain citizens rights over "their" city triggered revanchist actions that combined a 'reclaiming' of the neighbourhood with anti-immigration voices. This resulted in closing down the local playground because it was over-occupied by immigrant Muslim children and their mothers who were 'polluting' the place and didn't let 'our' children to play. The question of the centre and "its ghettos that are populated by masses of illegal immigrants" together with the immigration issue became two of the major issues of the pre-election campaigns for



state government (2009) and for municipal one (2010), leading to the significant rise and election of right-wing and even fascist political parties in the municipality of Athens.

This climate was further burdened by looming economic recession in Greece, the economic crisis that exploded in 2010 and resulted in the EU/IMF/ECB loan agreement and the subsequent austerity measures. During this period (2009 – 2011) the centre of Athens (as well as the greek situation) is strongly associated with definitions of ‘emergency’. Ghetto remains the unquestionable public reality, constructing THE problem and increasing the fear of crime and insecurity that also form a substantial part of the centre’s public discourse. The governmental institutions start adopting this rhetoric from 2010, further legitimising it as THE reality while also constructing the problem of the centre of Athens (irrespectively for all different neighbourhoods) along three lines:

- (a) The ghetto, namely the existence of illegal immigrants in the centre of Athens
- (b) Lack of safety, which is based on actually increased criminality (though this criminality homogenises petty with organised and violent crime)
- (c) The flight of its residents and its dereliction.

In the last months (January – May 2011) the situation of the centre of Athens was presented not only as critical or in crisis but as an emergency situation (Prime Minister) that resembles Beirut in the 70s (Mayor of Athens) and as such a situation requiring emergency measures.

This explosive situation in the centre of Athens came to a tipping point in May 2011 with the killing of a Greek man during a robbery by three dark-skinned immigrant men (as was circulated even before the police announced any arrests). This triggered a pogrom against immigrants by far-right and fascist groups that led to a killing of a Bangladeshi man (and of course the police hasn’t resolved this crime) and to dozens of immigrants being attacked and injured; a reality that still goes on today (31<sup>st</sup> May 2011).

#### **“Athens in crisis”: Inner-city revitalisation policies**

As a response to the heated public media discourse, central government started placing particular attention to the issues concerning the centre of Athens. Since the beginning of 2010 a number of committees were formed and numerous reports were published with analyses, evaluations and proposals for the problems the centre was facing. Issues of informal trade, illegal migration, public health, drugs, prostitution, homelessness and building dereliction were discussed and various recommendations were drafted. Also a number of architectural competitions for public spaces (the first one for Theatrou Sq.) were launched or announced. After this first intensification of governmental interest, no measures were specified or implemented. Vague announcements were made in the pre-electoral debate of November 2010, while the outcomes of the cross-ministerial meetings were announced twice - in January and in March 2011 – making it clear that the government is willing to let time roll. The dramatic events of May 2011, however, forced the government to show that it can act to resolve the problems and therefore it announced specific measures for the centre of Athens. These measures are publicised in the form of a combined Action Plan organising the measures mainly in relation to the responsible ministries.

It is clear that the measures included in this Action Plan have nothing to do with an integrated regeneration neighbourhood policy; rather they consist an arbitrary and non-structured pick-and-mix of measures or programmes available (programmed or planned) by the ministries involved. Although we do not intend to give emphasis to the legal or procedural aspects of the announced measures, it is worth noting that the Plan (intentionally) does not include specific descriptions of its aims, or a definition and a rationale for the targeted areas and the diverse targeted groups (other than the control of illegal migrants) and finally it does not present expected outcomes. As a result, the Action Plan seems like a catalogue of various possible measures – many of them intended for other neighbourhoods of the Municipality of Athens – while previous analyses made by institutional and other bodies are not taken into account. These measures are organised under a list of vague (or maybe not so vague, or even intentional) ‘strategic goals’ to be implemented by the government with the cooperation of the Local Administration and the civil society. These ‘strategic goals’, which are

presented as an “integrated state intervention that aims to reinsure the right to a safe, sustainable, attractive and vivid city for its inhabitants and visitors” are:

- Ensuring the conditions of safe living, the empowerment of the social fabric and the prevention of violence,
- Controlling the overcrowding of illegally staying immigrants and improving the terms of social integration of legal immigrants and asylum beneficiaries,
- Improving the quality of urban environment,
- Revitalising the economic activity,
- Ensuring the return of ‘inhabitants’ and the restraint of businesses,
- Highlighting and enhancing the cultural identity of the city and its strength as a tourist destination,
- Improving social services delivery with respect to the right of the most vulnerable,
- Ensuring the terms that will allow the recovery of the public space from citizens and the social participation in neighbourhoods,
- Encouraging civil society’s actions and creativity.

Without going into great detail about the proposed measures, one can distinguish three main directions in the Plan:

- Policing, control and repression: meaning adjustments in immigration and asylum legislation, establishing peripheral detention camps and deporting of illegal migrants, together with even more police presence in Athens’ centre.
- Interventions for improving the physical environment: Specific small-scale interventions in public spaces (redesigning of public squares, few and fragmented pedestrianisations) and tax incentives for the renovation of derelict or abandoned buildings in two pilot areas (Zones of Special Regeneration). It is interesting to note that these have not even the pretext of social purpose. While significant tax relieves are given to owners or well-placed investors to rehabilitated abandoned property, there is no stated concern about the impact of this redevelopment approach. It rather seeks to ensure that middle and high-income residents will move in the area<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, considering the public discourse about specific inner-city areas, it becomes clear that the two areas chosen as pilot Zones are linked to the entrepreneurial interests of specific investors.
- Decentralisation of social structures: drug prevention and rehabilitation programs will move to hospitals (OKANA); homeless shelters will become overnight shelters; distribution of free meals will become mobile.

This decentralisation is also accompanied by the announcement of new social infrastructures: centres for refugees in cooperation with the church, centres for asylum seekers, centre for support of drug addicts, centre for the support of abused women. But, in the name of better service provision in non-central areas of the city (with no previous study of actual needs) specific social services will be moved away from the centre, or will become mobile. These are proposed measures at a time of dismantling of the social welfare state and the public sector, while the few existing centrally-located social structures are either underfunded or abolished.

The Municipality of Athens is a key player in the formation and implementation of the Action Plan, but it has limited authority, also due to its very tight budget. In his speech to the Municipal council, the Mayor of Athens (Kaminis), presented the specific ‘immediate measures’ to be undertaken from the municipality. Broadly, these ‘immediate measures’ support the central government’s Action Plan. He plans for increased policing and control to address issues of criminality (but the main target is illegal migration); for revitalising public spaces (with better lightning, cleaning and cultural events, as well as converting some empty hotels into student housing); for decentralising social services; and for promoting the city as a tourist destination. What is also surprisingly undertaken by the Mayor is to draft a new law for the regulation of demonstrations (!). Public demonstrations in the centre (which are

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<sup>2</sup> the only term in exchange to the tax relieves is that the properties are rented to people that can guarantee an income three times over the rent

obviously multiplying because of the situation in Greece and the ongoing austerity measures imposed) have been blamed as one of the main reasons for the general degradation of the central commercial and entrepreneurial areas.

## **Implications and aims...**

### **... of the adoption public discourse**

Public – especially dominant media – discourses are not neutral; they embody ideologies and agendas symbolically expressed by certain words and practically supported by ‘unquestionable truths’. Through their influence on shaping public opinions and legitimising certain views, they play a significant role in representing and shaping realities and in constructing ‘problems’. As such, the dominant public discourse concerning the centre of Athens had – and still has – significant influence on people’s perceptions, on the legitimisation and even normalisation of certain practices, on political policy-making and, of course, on the targeted groups and areas. Naming is a powerful process and as such the words used to describe and define a problem also imply the ‘right’ or the ‘sole’ possible solution to it.

The uncritical adoption and reproduction of the ghetto in governmental discourse – with the symbolism and the connotations it bears – had considerable impact on both people and places. By associating immigrants, and mainly more visible and male immigrants, with the problems of the centre it enhanced the far-right xenophobic discourse, giving rise to various racist incidents and attacks on immigrants. Also, by constructing such a polarised climate, it limited the chances (if there were any) of actually developing a socially-oriented asylum and integration policy that would benefit the thousands of immigrants that are still in limbo. Rather, it targets the most vulnerable of the immigrants and promotes a policy of deportations.

Besides constructing the problematic immigrant Other, the ghetto and criminality discourse strongly affects the specific neighbourhoods. By promoting a politics of fear for certain neighbourhoods it strengthens the overall sense of insecurity and fear not only of the existing residents, but also of the possible new residents or visitors; something that further isolates these neighbourhoods, possibly promoting segregation and discouraging local businesses. In addition, by placing petty crime together with organised crime under the umbrella of increased criminality, it hides the rather serious issue of organised crime and its increase (and thus any chances of dealing with it). Furthermore, this discourse of criminality results in calls for more repressive measures, thus increasing the securitization of space and everyday life, with no reference to issues of poverty and welfare.

There is yet another adverse (to some) effect of this discourse. Combining the ghetto symbolism with the fear of (actual or perceived) crime and the discourse of ‘greek’ flight from the centre it puts increased pressure on property values and on the existing property owners. Together with the current economic crisis and the reluctance of banks to give mortgages, it creates a very fertile ground for real-estate speculation and changing of ownership; something that started as a rumour but by now it has become a more-or-less well known fact for certain areas.

### **... of definitions and the proposed measures**

In terms of the actual proposed measures there are two distinct approaches that we would like to highlight: first, the homogenisation of people and places and second, addressing social issues in spatial terms (or “a spatialisation of social issues”).

The official governmental discourse intentionally refers to the targeted areas and groups with generalisations and abstractions obscuring the real dimensions of issues. By using generic categories, such as ‘migrants’ ‘inhabitants’ or ‘businessman’, it homogenises social groups that often have strong internal differences. A variety of interests (often conflicting) and needs are treated the same. Similarly, the word ‘centre’ is used in various occasions to describe very different areas of the Municipality of Athens facing different issues and having different needs.

What is officially defined as the historical and commercial centre of Athens consists of central areas that traditionally never had a high density of housing. They were areas with commercial, service and office uses and small manufacturing clusters which, through the deindustrialisation of the centre and the decentralisation of public services, gradually were abandoned leaving significant vacuums. The overall economic stagnation of the last years increased the number of ground-floor stores and offices. It is in these areas (mostly in empty buildings) that recent waves of (mostly) transit migration find shelter.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, a number of central neighbourhoods of Athens (mainly on the Western part of the Municipality) have a different story. Since the 80s, in a context of gradual upward social mobility and suburbanisation, an important percentage of older residents move to the suburbs leaving space for the installation of new poorer residents, in a great percentage migrants.

Also a number of areas of the centre of Athens have been since the period of the Olympic games in an 'unfulfilled' gentrification process and a number of investors or well-off new inhabitants have been buying property there. These people are putting pressure on governments for facilitating the gentrification process with the aid of public intervention (since market mechanisms have not worked until now).

Thus the implication of the 'abandonment of the centre from its inhabitants' and the measures for the 'return of the inhabitants to the centre' rather echo the expectations of real-estate interests in specific areas of the city (as the selected pilot areas imply), than actual needs of its actual inhabitants. Clearly, these areas, which are deprived but in relatively prime locations are re-claimed by the middle (and higher) classes through state-led revanchists practices (Smith, 1996)

Furthermore, as was presented above, the measures give emphasis to the 'improvement of the physical environment' as an answer to its problems. Degradation and devaluation of buildings and public spaces are viewed as a crucial concern. The problems are spotted in specific areas of Athens and are attributed to their 'bad/negative image', to the bad condition of their buildings and the poor design of their public spaces, and (of course) to the visibility of vulnerable groups in their public spaces. These people are treated as a problem for the city rather than as people that have problems. Redesign and clearance-operations are used in combination to improve the image and attractiveness of the city, but are also presented as vehicles for addressing local (social) problems.

As is often mentioned, the 'success' of the Action Plan is primarily depending upon restoring the feeling of security amongst the inhabitants of Athens. And this is guaranteed by the central role given to the police and associated forces. What is mostly important to mention, in relation to the governmental measures for the centre of Athens is their timeliness. The problems faced by the different groups that live, work or visit the centre are not new. The intense phenomena of social exclusion, dereliction and poverty, together with the intensification of xenophobic opinions and racist violence, are the result of systematic abandon of these areas and people by the state. The choice of "non-policy", instead of a long term, constant plan of public intervention, sustains a state of emergency that allows for 'radical interventions' resulting in the announcements of exceptional but necessary measures (also fragmented) after whatever crisis emerges. These measures, or their intention, are announced mainly in times of social unrest allowing for authoritarian directions and policies. Security agenda(s) and the increased role of various police forces replace possible urban/ neighbourhood programmes and broader social policies.

## **Conclusion**

As was the case in the previous developmental momentum of Athens, the Olympic games, a neoliberal model for the city is reproduced, putting emphasis on the need for economic growth and international positioning. Tourism, as the only viable economic model proposed for the city, 'requires' a positive inner-city image and urban poverty and diversity is viewed as a threat to the achievement of this goal.

In the midst of a severe economic crisis and the risk of extreme phenomena of social exclusion and inequality, the urban renewal process for the Centre of Athens is imposed by aggressive forms of

policing and the enforcement of 'law and order'. The actual situation in Athens, as well as in other urban contexts (Samrara 2009, Raco 2003), puts under questions the significance and role of governance in a context of severe, and growing inequality;

Urban processes and models of Urban Governance cannot be examined independently of wider processes and scales, with direct impacts on local everyday life. The regeneration of Central Athens happens in the midst of the enforcement of severe austerity measures, the dismantling of welfare state and the shrinking of the public sector. In the name of the crisis, social provisions and redistributive mechanisms, having until now worked as protection nets and 'corrections' to the capitalist model, are now withdrawn. The adoption by the state of the 'Ghetto' rhetoric, reproducing fear and calling for security (for who really?), is a very intentional tactic in order to bypass the discussion about poverty, and has unpredictable effects. It is quite obvious today that the new phase of savage or vicious capitalism will be coupled with increased violence and authoritarianism (state and para-statal) and rising xenophobia.

The case of Athens is not unique – the difference is that the discussion about “the struggle to belong” and urban regeneration programmes have rarely been discussed. However, it is a general trend for Urban policies worldwide to incorporate zero-tolerance and policing, legitimising far-right discourses and practices, while issues of poverty and inequality are intentionally underplayed. In this context integration and conviviality become polarised and much more difficult to govern in terms of social justice.

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