

Yannis Kotsifos, Journalists' Union of Macedonia and Thrace
Daily Newspapers, GREECE

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you already know from the documents you've all pretty much received, the journalists' union which I represent, the Journalists' Union of Macedonia and Thrace Daily Newspapers, is one of the three associate partners of the Initiative that brings us here today.

Our union is not the largest journalists' union in Greece and, therefore, neither is it the most representative one in terms of demographics. However, the geographical area it covers –that is the regional and northern part of the country– is historically linked to the need for coexistence with minorities.

Our headquarters are located in the city of Thessaloniki, a city which has been struggling throughout its modern years with the reminiscence of its multinational identity, an identity that has been wiped out during the post-Second World War period, but also an identity that has been slowly reemerging in the past two decades, albeit in a smaller scale and on completely different terms. It is precisely through these terms that society is striving to reclaim those characteristics of tolerance and cohesion that are so very called for by the city's past.

As such, while most of you have probably heard in the news about the Pakistani and Afghan labor migrants who live in the streets of Athens, you are probably unaware of the third generation Albanians who are seriously considering leaving Thessaloniki due to lack of work after having lived here for more than twenty years and raised their children in Greece. Perhaps you haven't heard of the Muslim and Pomak communities in Thrace, either.

In this context, the selection of Thessaloniki and the journalists' union of Macedonia and Thrace Daily Newspapers as a location and co-organizer of the national conference which studied the case of Greece within the Initiative's framework, follows a very solid logic: the capital cities and the large urban centers may indeed be the areas where the minority-related issues are often manifested with explosive tensions, but it is the smaller cities, in the regions and provinces, that are carry the burden of discovering ways to handle these issues effectively and for the long term.

I presume that most of you have already taken a look at the conclusions drawn by each of the three national conferences and you've realized that many of these conclusions coincide with one another, at least insofar as the need to improve our immigration-related coverage.

This does make sense: you see, no one can claim that there has been systematic and efficient journalism training when it comes to immigration-related issues, especially at a time when employers (may

they be private publishers or even the public broadcasters) view this as another opportunity for sensationalist coverage.

No one can overlook the fact that the legislative framework and the self-regulating framework that we the journalists proclaim as a rule are hardly adequate, are in desperate need of reform and are often subjected to deliberate biases.

There is, however, one factor that, at this point in time, gives Greece the “case study” crowning glory status and that is the profound economic crisis, in conjunction with the national elections that are to take place on May 6.

The Initiative’s co-organizers who were in Thessaloniki last June will recall that the conference’s second day program had to be shuffled around in order to accommodate a series of strike actions. As a matter of fact, the organizations they represent issued a joint statement of support to Greece’s striking journalists. Well, that day was essentially the starting point of a period of political turmoil which is culminating in Sunday’s elections; I’m sure that you are all familiar with all that has transpired in-between and especially with Greece’s nosedive into a deep recession.

Perhaps you are not as familiar with the development of two social and political camps, one being the “pro-memorandum” and the other the “anti-memorandum”. Theoretically, these two camps, represented by various –and in some instances unexpected– political

forces, are set to face off in Sunday's elections. But what is most impressive and relevant to our meeting today, is that the immigrants found themselves without warning right in the midst of this face-off a mere few weeks before the elections, and this was manifested in a way that reaffirmed all the journalistic wrongs that were underlined during last June's conference.

The government abruptly announced the creation of detention centers for illegal immigrants, as part of a series of measures that will supposedly resolve in a matter of months issues that have been aimlessly evolving for decades now. Automatically, this kindled all the well-known phobias, alongside with those voices of denial that there is an issue at hand.

So, we have:

Three far right-wing parties which vie for entry to parliament on a single platform, that being the "immigration issue"; the leftist political parties are investing on immigration with equal intensity on their agenda, but they're doing so from the opposite end of the race. The supposedly centrist and main parties are also vying for the role of effective crisis manager, as if it's a crisis they just now discovered.

The basic outcome is twofold:

- Society is quite ready to succumb to this issue, feeding the need to channel the unbearable economic pressures it faces. According to a recent survey, 79,3% of the respondents stated they feel they are at risk because of the immigrants in their city, while 54,7%

approve of the detention centers, as long as they're not built near them.

- The frequent rhetoric that links immigrants with crime has overflowed into the economic crisis and given fertile ground for "pure nation" talk.

Up to a point, many of you could say, none of this is something new. However, the one parameter that grants an even more ominous dimension to the issue at hand is the fact that the high tones that usually accompany a political involvement in these types of issues were already in the making through a makeshift form of political racism, molded to suit the economic crisis environment.

From 2010 onwards, when Greece sought the assistance of the International Monetary Fund and signed the first memorandum of support from the European partners, the public debate and political controversy began to acquire characteristics rivaled by any traditional racial conflict. A large part of the Greek voters will go to the polls on Sunday equipped with a choice of words such as *national treason*, *low bidders*, *quislings*, *occupation collaborators*. A lot of Greeks are to cast their ballot not in order to vote for a government with an agenda set on specific terms and outlooks, but rather, in order to "safeguard" a vague "national ideal" from the conspiring foreign enemies.

With these words in mind, I believe it's clear to all that there a single reservoir that pumps water to the spinning mill of racism: indeed, the need to define or invent an external enemy can be analyzed through

a historical or sociological approach; but it does have one characteristic drawback that works as a dissolvent in journalism and that is the element of convenience.

You see, when you designate an external enemy, let's say Angela Merkel, and set up headlines about the Fourth Reich, or call the German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, "a cripple" in social media, then this makes for very bad journalism and you are more than likely contributing to the disgrace of public discourse. However, when you do the same in reference to social groups standing right next to you then you should remember that you are more than likely arming a hand that will use these arms against them.

There were quite a few optimistic messages given by the Thessaloniki conference participants, especially in regards to the journalists' willingness to develop better tools in dealing with immigration issues. On the other hand, there was a very pessimistic message too: nearly three out of four participants said that they don't foresee a change in the near future regarding the way they cover immigration. Unfortunately, they were right. But please allow me to maintain the hope that their pessimism is attributed to the unprecedented crisis the country is going through, a crisis which, for the time being, brings to surface a number of negative traits. Also, allow to hope that overcoming this crisis will also mean overturning these negative traits.

Last week marked the anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Many of you surely know the Belarusian journalist, Svetlana Alexievich who, in 1996 –risking her own health– , published a remarkable book containing the personal accounts of survivors and family members of the victims, all tragic protagonists of the catastrophic accident. Alexievich, a pioneer in documentary prose and narrative journalism, did similar work on the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the women’s role in war, suicides in the Soviet Union after the fall of communism, and other issues, all of which had a recurring theme: the stance (and resistance) of humans to evil, dealing with it in a crisis or disaster. In an interview I took from her in the year 2000, this great woman who, at both a political and personal cost, devoted her writing career to such a difficult subject, stated that during her long trail in the midst of evil her biggest fear was that of reproducing it. I think this fear is a useful guide to help us all do our work better.