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The Implementation of a Campus Police in Greece

A Breach of the Anti-authoritarian Historical Heritage of Greek Universities

Interview with Filippa Chatzistavrou and Yiorgos Vassalos

Céline Mavrot

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The Implementation of a Campus Police in Greece

A Breach of the Anti-authoritarian Historical Heritage of Greek Universities

*Interview with Filippa Chatzistavrou
and Yiorgos Vassalos*

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This interview took place in March, 2023.

Émulations received Filippa Chatzistavrou and Yiorgos Vassalos for an interview on the events currently happening in Greek higher education institutions. Invoking law-and-order purposes, Greek authorities have recently decided to introduce a police corps to public universities. This breach in universities' autonomy has prompted numerous criticisms and mobilizations of Greek students and university staff. Filippa Chatzistavrou and Yiorgos Vassalos shed light on these events and examine them in the context of the Greek financial crisis and the subsequent privatization trend.

Filippa Chatzistavrou is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Politics at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She holds a PhD in political science from the Université Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne. She is a specialist of governance theories and policies, as well as comparative and European Union politics. Among others, she has studied the consequences of the European economic adjustment program on the Greek politico-administrative system ([Revue française d'administration publique](#), 2016/2) and on democratic mobilizations in the context of the sovereign debt crisis ("[Mobilising for Democracy during Austerity in Greece](#)").

Yiorgos Vassalos is a political scientist and teaches at SciencesPo Lille. He has a PhD from the University of Strasbourg. He is also working as an advocacy officer for NGOs in Brussels. He specializes in questions of lobbying, conflicts of interests, and the relationship between politics and finance at the EU level. He has recently published on these topics ("Le pantouflage financier à la Commission européenne"; "[L'Autorité européenne des marchés financiers et l'interprétation des relations entre régulateurs et régulés](#)"). In 2015, he wrote the article "[Greece's Strangulation by the EU: Dictated by Law or Politics?](#)".

Émulations: The relationship between students and the police forces in Greece has to be considered in a historical perspective. The colonels sent military tanks to repress in blood the student revolt against the military dictatorship (1967-1974) at the Athens Polytechnic University on 17th November 1973, resulting in 24 deaths among students...

Yiorgos Vassalos: ... 24 nominally identified deaths among students and other protesters. There are also 16 more confirmed dead that weren't identified according to the most official study, the one by the National Hellenic Research Foundation (Kallivretakis, 2004).

Filippa Chatzistavrou: Aristotelis Sarrikosta was the only Greek photojournalist at the heart of the events of that day. According to his own testimony, "[...] *the students were calling the people, the police had taken all the posts but did not intervene because it was daytime and the people would lynch them. The operation took place at night. That night, no one was present because we didn't expect them to operate. The students were brutally beaten, and from what we learned the other day, the police put them directly into cages and a large number of students were court-martialed [...].*"¹ The fascist brutality of junta against student uprisings is the climax testing popular resistance. This is a turning point in the late 20th century history of Greece. The Greek University was erected as the symbol of eternal battlegrounds for democracy and academic freedom.

In 2021, the Greek Parliament decided to implement a special police force on public university campuses. These forces are affiliated with the police and not the universities. Academics diffused petitions and manifestos around the world to raise awareness of the issue of police violence². Can you explain the content of the disputed project and the claims of the mobilized students and scholars?

Filippa Chatzistavrou: According to the law aimed at stationing police on campuses, the OPPIs (Protection teams for public Universities)³ are made up of police personnel and special guards⁴. They are formed based on decisions by the Chief of the Greek

¹ <https://www.nexusmedia.gr/sarrikostas-about-17-november-1973/>

² See for instance: <https://defendpublicuniversitiesgreece.wordpress.com/2022/06/13/open-letter-respect-public-universities-in-greece/>

³ For more information see <https://gowatch.gr/en/astynomia-sta-panepistimia-omades-prostasias-panepistimiakon-idrymaton-kai-provlimatismoi/>

⁴ Special guards are a category of personnel of the Hellenic Police established in 1999 for the purpose of guarding and protecting important facilities, high-ranking persons, and vulnerable targets, while later it was also used in purely police duties to suppress crime. The

Police. Special guards are hired for this purpose and allocated by the Greek Police Services, to which they belong, to Higher Educational Institutions. The recruitments started in January 2022 before the issuance of the implementing decree which defines the structure and operation of the specific service. According to the implementing presidential decree no. 53 of July 2022, 80% of the 400 special guards, i.e. 320 places – with the possibility of hiring an additional 600 from a list of runners-up, are filled by candidates holding any high school diploma of all types [Category A]. Out of the 600 runners-up, 480 will come from category A too. Staff hired graduates from the Training Centers of the Police School after 4 months training. Special guards recruited and trained to form the OPPIs should carry police baton (glop), handcuffs, radio, bulletproof vest, whistle, and flashlight. Although OPPI members will not carry firearms, the decree clarifies that they will be accompanied by armed officers of the Greek police. Special guards will be legalized to be inside Universities' campus buildings on the condition that the rector's authorities have installed special gates (tourniquet) and security cameras. The OPPI are in communication with the rector's authorities. However, Greek Police and the Ministry of Citizen Protection have the decisive role as to whether they will take action, while the university authorities having limited possibilities of intervention in their work.

The law openly violates the self-government of Greek universities, which is expressly guaranteed in Article 16.5a of the Constitution⁵. The fact that the Council of State favored the establishment of the special police force raises serious concerns regarding the independence of country's judicial system. According to the Constitution, the exercise of full self-government requires the participation of all members of the university community. In the framework of this law, faculty members are transformed into investigators, while carrying out surprise checks and searches on vehicles, persons, facilities, and premises. In the case of disciplinary action for students, OPPIs have pre-investigative duties. In the case of a sworn administrative examination, the faculty member should seek the assistance of the OPPI, who can contribute to the content of the file in the preliminary investigation. The OPPIs are able to participate as an additional team in joint police operations within the universities.

Regarding the historical background and the events that took place during the dictatorship, the presence of the police on university campuses takes on a particular

Special Guards can remain as permanent staff in the Greek Police and join the General Duties Police Staff.

⁵ Article 16.5a of the Greek Constitution: "[Education at university level shall be provided exclusively by institutions which are fully self-governed public law legal persons. These institutions shall operate under the supervision of the State and are entitled to financial assistance from it; they shall operate on the basis of statutorily enacted by-laws](#)".

meaning in Greece. In fact, this resulted in a “no-police policy”⁶ on campuses, that remained enforced until 2019. How does the collective memory of these events influence the current mobilizations in your view?

Filippa Chatzistavrou: The government’s political choices undermine the legacy of the anti-dictatorial student movement during the military dictatorship 1967-1974, especially the massive student demonstration and popular rejection of the junta in November 1973. Greek students want to preserve this legacy of fighting for a better future, thus preserving public education and welfare state. Actually, we are in a reverse situation in which the presence of police on campuses can directly jeopardize the safety and physical integrity of the students who form the new generation, succeeding those who fought at that time.

Proponents of the project hold that university campuses in the country have become lawless areas that need law enforcement actions. In which political context and debates can these claims be contextualized? Why was this issue a campaign element for Kyriákos Mitsotákis (president of the right-wing New Democracy party), elected Prime Minister in 2019’?

Filippa Chatzistavrou: The fact that no university in Europe has an established police force, only security guards who answer to the institutions’ administrations, shows the government’s obsession with repression and policing. The Greek government of New Democracy argues that the country belongs to Europe, but the adoption of authoritarian practices proves otherwise. Instead of guaranteeing campus safety for students and all members of the academic community, government officials have contributed to the defamation of public universities by presenting them as centers of lawlessness and delinquency. The government’s purpose is not to deal with delinquency, but to suppress any reaction to the successive neoliberal reform initiatives regarding academic governance, funding, and study programs. The main objective of all these reforms favoring academic capitalism is to increase external private funding for university research with the interference of economic, commercial interests (short-term results VS long-term knowledge), to attack academia’s professors (tenure) by freeing up fees from (privately funded) research, and to transform higher

⁶ To be authorized to intervene on campuses, the police needed an “express permission from the school’s rector and the approval of a prosecutor”, *New York Times*, “[Greece Tries Stationing Police on Campus, and Students Fight Back](#)”, 9 October 2022.

⁷ See the article on Academia from 28 May 2022, citing *Le Courrier International*, “[Contestation. L’instauration d’une police universitaire embrase les campus grecs](#)”, 27 May 2022.

education to a monetized private good by further standardizing education for students-clients. For that purpose, the most recent laws open the path for representatives of industry and business to sit on the boards of public universities and for students to complete theses without having obtained a master's degree beforehand. This new design of university governance enables the development of largely uncontrolled outsourcing while pushing for further bureaucratization of university functions. Currently, nominations are open for the positions of external members in the Councils of Greek universities. Businessmen of well-known companies in the country, Greek professors at famous American universities, local government officials and many peer professors have submitted nominations. These people with no direct or active affiliation with a University will have the first say, since a rector's election can be secured with votes from the five external members of a Council plus only one vote from the six internal members of a University.

What is the state of the implementation of the campus police forces today, and have you already observed the repercussions on everyday campus life?

Filippa Chatzistavrou: With the opening of higher educational institutions in 09/2022 and throughout the autumn, students, academics, and university workers responded to the government's plan with mass mobilizations in many Greek cities. Until now, despite official announcements and recruitments of 600 Special Guards in the Greek Police, the government has failed to police public universities due to students' and universities' community backlash. Nevertheless, excessive police violence reaches uncontrollable proportions every time there is a student demonstration or event. It is worth noting that the Union of Police Officers of Thessaloniki itself expressed several times since the beginning of the year 2023 its displeasure with the way the recruitments were made and with how the responsible Ministry allocates these forces to the University of Thessaloniki and the Polytechnic and Zografou Campus in the National Kapodistrian University of Athens.

Yiorgos Vassalos: In one case, a student almost died. On May 26, 2022, riot police – at that time the OPPI were under training and weren't yet deployed in Universities – invaded the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki to repress student mobilization and fired a stun grenade in the face of student Yannis Doussakis from a few meters. He had to be hospitalized for several days to avoid deafness. He has filed a complaint against the riot police and “any other party responsible”, which awaits judgement.

What are the implications for the autonomy of universities, freedom of speech, and academic freedom? How strongly are you concerned, and what is the situation in today's Greek academic world? This comes in addition to a situation of acute under-resourcing of Greek universities, even before the 2007-2008 financial crisis...

Filippa Chatzistavrou: Academic freedom as the (professional) responsibility to speak your mind and challenge conventional wisdom (*parresia*, *παρρησία*) in academia and in the public sphere is under threat in Greece. My fear is that if public universities lose their power to self-govern and are underfunded by the state, creating new knowledge and freely disseminating it to students and the wider community will be a very difficult task in the coming years. From the beginning of the debt crisis to date, Greek governments have reduced 80% of all direct funding for higher education institutions. The current government believes that the increase of the share of private expenditures on overall funding of higher education institutions will fill the gap. In almost half of OECD countries, private sources cover today at least a 5% larger share of all direct funding for higher education institutions than they did at the beginning of the 1990s. This general trend might get completely out of control in the foreseeable future in Greece, pushing public universities to a kind of partial and informal privatization. If it wins the 2023 parliamentary elections, the right-wing New Democracy party intends, in the next four years, to proceed with a constitutional review of Article 16 of the Constitution to allow the establishment of private universities.

Yiorgos Vassalos: The disastrous situation of Greek universities is one more long-term consequence of the 2010-2018 austerity “[Memoranda of Understanding](#)” (MoU) imposed by the EU to avoid a full debt default. A 2012 EU summit decided on a “haircut” for the Greek sovereign debt. This wasn’t limited to banks holding Greek debt; it included public institutions. According to the latter, 120 million euros of the 17 public universities’ bank deposits were transformed to Greek sovereign bonds and were cut by 70%. After this operation Greek universities were left with 33 million Euros. No government has restored this loss to date. On the contrary, the current conservative government has demonstrated outright hostility against public education. Recently, they issued a presidential decree by which they downgraded the status of diplomas from national drama, performing arts, conservatory, cinema, and dance schools to the level of high school diplomas, opening one more avenue to private education. In reaction to this decision, all 38 professors of the National Theatre of Greece Drama School resigned.

Beyond the academic world, how do you assess the strength of popular support for the fight against the presence of campus police forces? And how does the media coverage look like in the country?

Filippa Chatzistavrou: The Greek mainstream media's concerted effort to portray universities as centers of violence and lawlessness is only intended to influence public opinion and justify why 30 million euros are allocated to the recruitment and (inadequate 4 months short-term) training of OPPIs instead of appointing professors, administrative staff, and support education at all levels in Greece. Until now, popular (and mainly students') fights against surveillance and security policies within academia have been decisive. Many Greek youths take a position knowing that disciplinary practices are promoted as the answer to the rise of social and racial divides and class antagonisms, while restricting access to public universities is presented as a response to unemployment and economic inequality. After the dramatic train crash that killed 57 people and resulted in a significant number of missing persons⁸ – the majority of which were students, this trend against Greek authoritarianism is strengthening.

Yiorgos Vassalos: This train accident, the deadliest in Greek history, has provoked a mass protest movement of the kind that the country hasn't seen since the 2010-2015 struggle against the austerity MoUs. The difference is that (contrary to 2010-2015) university students and youth in general are now behind the initiative of most mobilizations. Experience gained in the struggle against campus police has been an important factor contributing to this. A major overhaul of the political landscape is underway. The next elections will show whether there is a future for campus police or whether the more general authoritarian turn of the Greek State will be halted.

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⁸ See for instance: "[Debt, graft and mismanagement: Greek train crash was 'waiting to happen'](#)", *Financial Times*, 5 April 2023; "[After Greece's train disaster, sorrow gives way to anger](#)", *Le Monde*, 4 March 2023.