“The murder of Filopoulos was definitely a turning point. For me, that's when the fan movement got ruined. After that, it was all stabbings. After Filopoulos' murder, it should’ve been clear that tensions were rising and that there guys were no longer playing around.

...the example of Filopoulos, and it spread to Thessaloniki quickly.

If the incident on Lavriou Avenue marked the beginning, now it's chaos, guys.”

March 29, 2007. Lavriou Avenue. Michalis Filopoulos, a 22-year-old Panathinaikos fan, is killed in clashes during a women's volleyball match between Panathinaikos and Olympiakos. The fight was prearranged. This scuffle is considered a pivotal moment in Greek hooliganism history.

“Everything changed after that. To go up against the other side’s army, you had to change too. That's what the guys did. When I'd warn them, "Guys, don't," they'd lift their shirts and say, "Look at all the stab wounds I've got."

Christina Texanou has been following Panathinaikos for nearly four decades. She’s one of the few women in the male-dominated world of organised fans. She still goes to watch matches, but after the Lavriou incident, she first distanced herself and then changed her perspective on fandom.

“The stream, my friend, is manageable. But once it turns into a torrent, you don't stand in its way, or you'll be swept away too.”

I'm Panagiotis Menegos, and this is the final episode of "Hooligan Express," a podcast series on fan violence by iMEdD, created with Kostas Koukoumakas and George Schinas.

After Nea Filadelfeia and Zagreb, it's time to look at the bigger picture, unfortunately, with another life lost. What are the characteristics of the new hooliganism, which has drastically changed from the past? Are organised fans collaborating with politics, business, and organised crime? How has the social tension of the last 15 years manifested on and off the field?

“Fan violence in Greece dates back to the start of the football league. Around 1910. The first decade of the 20th century saw riots in Greece. To suggest there were no incidents or fights among fans at that time would be highly inaccurate.”

Diamantis Mastrogiannakis had been a member of the national youth polo team. He did his PhD thesis on hooliganism in Greece at the University of Lille and currently teaches at the Greek Open University.

“After 1974, new fan clubs emerged, or those that disbanded in the pre-junta era were re-established. This ushered in a new form of violence characterised by greater organisation and coordination. After this, clashes between police and fans became very frequent.”

Football turned professional in Greece in 1979. Until then, there had been no fatalities. The first tragedy occurred with Gate7 in 1981, where 21 victims lost their lives due to overcrowding and poor crowd management, rather than riots.

*“The largest sporting tragedy ever to occur in a Greek stadium unfolded this afternoon at Karaiskakis Stadium, resulting in the deaths of 21 individuals, though some reports cite 19.”*

The first casualty of fan violence was 18-year-old cyclist Aris Athanasiadis, in September 1983, in the Charilaou area of Thessaloniki. This marked the beginning of a cycle of violence that persists today, with at least 14 fatalities recorded. Michalis Katsouris, whose fatal injury in August 2023 was extensively covered in our two previous episodes, sadly wasn't the final victim.

*-526?*

*-All good.*

*-531?*

*-All good.*

*Today marks the toughest day for our force, as we mourn the loss of one of our own, Giorgos.*

It's the moment his colleagues hear over the radio that Giorgos Lyngeridis, a riot police Sergeant, passed away just a day after his 31st birthday. The officer was struck directly by a naval flare during clashes outside the Melina Mercouri Rentis Indoor Hall at halftime of the volleyball match between Olympiakos and Panathinaikos.

“I went on this Viber group that we share with fellow riot police, where we discuss various issues, and found out there were riots at the Mercouri Hall. A very inappropriate venue, in my opinion, one where clashes were all too familiar to all of us. I found out that only one squad was deployed there, and I knew he was on duty. Then I heard about a serious injury to a fellow officer.”

Dimosthenis Pakos, President of the Union of Athens Police Employees, recalls the events of Thursday, December 7, when the fatality occurred.

“We assessed the situation and, and in the subsequent days when we visited the hospital, we all knew it was only a matter of time. We've been targeted too many times with naval flares; by luck we didn't get hurt.”

Lyngeridis spent 20 days intubated and in critical condition in the Intensive Care Unit of the General Hospital of Nikaia, where one of his legs was amputated. Meanwhile, the government closed football stadiums for two months but allowed other sports to continue. Three closed-door Olympiakos-Panathinaikos football derbies and one basketball match open to crowds took place. Let's not forget, all this occurred due to riots stemming from a volleyball match. But this isn't the only paradox. Over time, central authorities have responded to fan violence mainly through communication. This approach, marked by a repression-punishment dichotomy, has proven ineffective over time.

“It has been sociologically observed that people are not deterred by severe penalties; they are willing risk not getting caught.”

Lawyer Thanasis Kaimenakis, has previously defended individuals accused of sports law violations. Measures such as electronic ticketing or integrated camera systems in stadiums are often forgotten and not implemented once incidents fade from the news, officer Dimosthenis Pakos adds.

“After Alkis' death, it's inconceivable to hear thousands of government promises only to later learn from official sources that "we will shut down illegal fan clubs." This is essentially an admission, acknowledging that illegal fan clubs were operating under their watch. But no one said anything. This is mockery.”

“The world crumbled around me. Everything faded. I fell out of bed in pain. At first, I thought it was a nightmare, but it was real.”

Standing next to Aris Kampanos is difficult. He's the father who tragically lost his 19-year-old son on February 1, 2022 in Thessaloniki. His speech is slow, his voice trembling with emotion, interrupting our conversation. During the Alkis murder trial, Prosecutor Kyriaki Kliaba described the perpetrators as "good and disciplined soldiers, driven by passions, fanaticism, and hatred." Alkis, who had no involvement in what we typically refer to as the fan movement and simply provided the wrong answer to the question "what team do you support?" is the quintessential example of the new pattern of hooliganism. This second-generation hooliganism usually manifests off the field without necessarily being triggered by a sporting event. Here’s Christina Texanou.

“Loads of brawls never see the light of day. Fans clash in squares everywhere on a daily basis. It’s just that nobody dies... just luck most times.”

Professor Diamantis Mastrogiannakis warns:

“The most dangerous thing happening in Greece right now is the move of clashes off the field.”

This is confirmed by riot policeman Dimosthenis Pakos, who’s been involved in stadium policing since 2002 and was previously a fan who followed his team even on away games.

“Fan violence has two sides: the clashes that occur during sports events and the violence that occurs off the field. Fan violence exists in neighbourhoods and squares. Alkis was killed by ten thugs in a neighbourhood, not at a football game.”

So are we discussing fan violence or just violence with fan-like traits? British author James Montague, who has extensively studied ultras globally, provides us with context beyond Greece.

“Within football, in the past 15-20 years, we see that violence is no longer part of the match day experience, but it has moved to arranged fighting that can take place far away from the stadium, in places like forests or disused factories. If you go on Instagram, TikTok or Telegram you won't find anything. But they are followed almost as widely as the game itself.”

But there’s another crucial point to consider.

“Anybody who commits a crime inside the football stadium is punished harder than if he'd committed it outside the stadium. On a human rights level, this is very problematic.”

Montague argues that football stadiums serve as a reflection: They mirror what’s happening in society. In these turbulent times, he notes, fans couldn’t have been peaceful. He points to the Netherlands, where riots erupted during the Ajax vs Feyenoord match in September, shocking Europe. Similarly, in France… fan movement was prohibited for specific matches, following the murder of a Nantes fan in December 2023. Perhaps we can view fan violence from a different perspective; through the lens of the ultras' rallying cry "against modern football". In our podcast research, we engaged with various organised fan groups, delved into fan forums, and reviewed recent literature. What became evident is that modern fans, including those in Greece, feel disconnected from the sport's grassroots essence. Sometimes, clashes take on a dimension of resistance or a quest to preserve authenticity against expensive tickets, corporate sponsors, and the portrayal of football as a televised commodity. Amidst all this, especially in Greece, we must also consider the factor of crisis.

“That's how I believe the violence escalated, and I'll mark this point with an asterisk. I’m referring to the crisis issue, which we cannot view in isolation. This aspect has been repeatedly emphasised in relation to both Alkis and Michalis: that when the prevailing order is rotten to the core, decay takes over.”

What Dimitris, an organised Aris fan, shares is particularly interesting, especially considering Thessaloniki, a city with impoverished areas like the western districts, where youth unemployment reaches 40%, leading to a surge in fan violence. Officer Dimosthenis Pakos attributes the heightened intensity of fan violence to the social unrest during the Greek bailout crisis, when, as he says, the state was unable to manage it.

“For the past 15 years, we're no longer talking about mere fans or hooligans. We're talking about armies.”

In the year and a half between the deaths of Alkis Kampanos and Michalis Katsouris, fan violence has not only persisted but has intensified, with over 50 ongoing investigations in Athens alone. They all involve off-field incidents, where the perpetrators consistently outnumber the victims.

“We're indeed witnessing a surge in violence, primarily among young fans. One notable aspect is the absence of prearranged fights. We've managed to suppress that because of our vigilance. We now have chance encounters.”

This was stated in an interview last summer by the head of the Sub-directorate for Combating Sports Violence, Konstantinos Christologlou. He stressed that we're not dealing with mere scuffles or prearranged fights but rather ambushes in cafes, squares, internet cafes, and even outside the Court of Appeal in March 2023.

*A violent incident left one injured outside the Athens Court of Appeal today.*

Knives, batons, and even axes, along with a working grenade, have all been discovered in the arsenal of hooligans. The brawls may even involve local rivalries among lower divisions.

*The clashes between Proodeftiki and Ionikos fans before the Proodeftiki vs Egaleo game...*

And they are almost always accompanied by videos fearlessly posted on YouTube or shared in private Telegram channels.

Fans strongly oppose travel bans that have been enforced for about 20 years. They see them as a factor that exacerbates tension rather than alleviating it.

“I believe another reason for the perpetuation of this violence is the absence of fan travel. This only fuels the animosity.”

“There used to be a culture of mutual respect among fans. Sure, there will be conflicts both on and off the pitch, but we should respect opposing fans, who traveled miles to support their team.”

“A significant factor for me and many people of my generation is the travel ban, implemented essentially to safeguard football as a commercial product. It didn’t address the issue of violence, it exacerbated it.”

Two other aspects of fan culture indicate a shift towards the new hooliganism. Firstly, the slogans. Over time, they have increasingly glorified fan clashes, becoming incomprehensible to the wider fan base. Secondly, drugs. Just like you can find them anywhere, they are also present in mass social events like stadiums. This is Dimitris, the Aris fan:

“Drugs in stadiums are changing. In my generation, it was weed. Personally I didn’t smoke it. We were being made fun of for only drinking alcohol, but weed is a counterproductive drug, it makes too relaxed. Then came cocaine, amphetamines, and gyms.”

“Nowadays, cocaine is everywhere. Wherever I go, I see kids snorting coke—in stadiums, in clubs, in bars, in taverns... Wherever I go, there’s coke.”

…adds Christina Texanou. But it’s not only the stimulation.

“I think that the issue of drug dealing is something worth noting, since many people within fan clubs earn money this way.”

What Giorgos says, who has been an organised Iraklis fan for many years, was off the record confirmed by almost everyone we spoke to. This brings us to another aspect of the evolving fan culture: the transition of fans into professionals, profiting from what was once a purely passionate relationship with the club.

Here’s Giorgos again.

“I know that, usually, the older fans tend to work as security and are involved in ticket scalping.”

Christina Texanou describes it in more detail:

“Fan jobs include the various roles you’ll be assigned to, selling tickets outside the stadium, working as security at various clubs, or working as security at concerts. These are the main fan jobs.

Did you work any of those?

Yes, I did. I've worked a lot of them. I’ve done a lot to raise my two kids, man. And I’m not ashamed. A job’s a job. I've worked alongside fans from Olympiakos, AEK, and Panathinaikos.”

All this occurs with the approval, if not support, of football club owners, who, according to Dimosthenis Pakos...

“…utilised the associations of organised fans as personal armies. At some point, we need to face the truth and admit that this is what happened. Who can offer protection? Me? Every hooligan or fan, as soon as they face trial, has access to the best lawyers. Who can provide protection? Unless they're all so rich.”

But it’s not just the fans who financially rely on football clubs. Over the past 25 years, it has become routine for clubs to employ retired officers as security and match officials.

“This is unacceptable. Individuals who served in the Greek police serving in the teams after retirement. You might argue, am I suggesting we sever their future? No, I’m not. But we must investigate whether there was prior corruption and prior collusion. I cannot stand for 8-10 hours at the stadium of anyone who earns millions for the fans of a team to watch football, only to then receive odd orders during riots from those who are my superiors and then see them working in the same stadiums.”

“Very male, usually working class, very white.” This profile still holds for hooligans today as James Montague describes it. As we near the conclusion, despite the multitude of aspects that a significant social issue like fan violence has, we focus on one. Both the victims and the perpetrators in the cases we've examined are products of the crisis and the working class. Giorgos Zervogiorgis, Michalis Katsouris' brother, arrived at our interview in work attire. What good can the apology from high-ranking officials months ago do? We made multiple attempts to reach Giorgos Lyngeridis' family to share their voices, but they declined to speak with us amidst their grief.

“I too had hoped that, after Alkis' sacrifice, there would be a calm in the football world. Sadly, the cycle of violence has not been closed.”

This is the conclusion of Aris Kampanos. Throughout our investigation, we attempted to locate Andreas Filopoulos, Michalis' father. We made dozens of calls to the numbers we found; either no one answered or the line was dead.

*The number you are calling…*

We decided to visit his neighbourhood in the area of Kolonos. We rang the bell. No response. The door was open, so we entered the building. On the building expenses board, next to the name Andreas Filopoulos, there was a blank line. We went up to his floor. A doormat was folded outside a wooden door. We rang the bell, preparing our apology for the unannounced visit. One, two, three times. No one answered. A neighbour noticed our presence and opened her own door. We introduced ourselves, and she politely responded, "Haven't seen him in a while. He's probably in his village. He’s not around very often anymore."

"Hooligan Express" is a podcast series by the non-profit journalism organisation iMEdD.

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