“My cousin called me at 3:30 and informed me that Michalis was injured,

but he didn't have any details about his condition. "You need to come to Athens." I set off from Euboea, where I was, I went to Elefsina, picked up my mother and headed to the hospital. That was where we found out that Michalis was dead.”

It is the morning of 08/08/2023. Giorgos Zervoyiorgis, Michalis Katsouris' half-brother is at the Red Cross hospital. Katsouris, an organised AEK fan, had been stabbed in the left arm during violent clashes that had erupted the previous night outside the Nea Filadelfeia stadium. In the hospital, his brother was trying to comprehend the events, while his mother had collapsed beside him.

The hospital was swarming with police officers. Some injured Croatians were also there and they were being guarded.

“The only thing I did was to confirm the identity of my brother Michalis, as they were unaware of who he was. So I provided the identification. From that moment on, my mother and I remained at the hospital for three days until she improved.”

I am journalist Kostas Koukoumakas. Alongside my colleagues, George Schinas and Panagiotis Menegos we delved into the evolution of hooliganism from the 1980s to the present day. We spoke with families of victims, as well as police officers, fans, researchers, and lawyers. We sought to decipher the "code of the terraces," exploring the connections between fan violence, politics, and organised crime in Greece and across Europe. "Hooligan Express" is an audio documentary produced by the non-profit journalism organisation iMEdD, scheduled to be released in three episodes. The story begins on a summer evening in Nea Filadelfeia.

On the eve of the AEK-Dinamo Zagreb Champions League qualifying match, despite UEFA's ban on fan movement, approximately 150 Croatian hooligans descended upon Athens. They were joined by a smaller faction of Panathinaikos hooligans with whom they share a twinning bond. The invaders clashed with AEK fans, and for at least 10 minutes, intense fighting erupted around the stadium. Following closely behind the Croatian group were police motorcyclists from the Delta squad. According to court documents reviewed by iMEdD, the police officers were never instructed to intervene. The nearest riot squad was stationed at Drakopoulou Park in Patisia. By the time they reached the stadium, everything was over. Dimosthenis Pakos, President of the Union of Athens Police Employees, has nearly 20 years of experience in riot policing. According to him, the situation was straightforward operationally.

“Police squads were quickly dispatched to different areas in Nea Filadelfeia. They caught anyone they could within three minutes. Those detained were also beaten due to the earlier incident. If there had been forces present, according to the information, it would've been hard for these groups to make contact in Nea Filadelfeia.”

In the subsequent days, it emerged that the Croats, who were members of the Bad Blue Boys, renowned as one of Europe's toughest groups, with neo-Nazis among them, had crossed half of Greece unimpeded, covering a distance of nearly 500km.

On the same morning, the Interpol office in Montenegro alerted the Greek police, based on an operational document seen by iMEdD, that high-risk hooligans were en route to Greece. They entered through Albania, passed through Patras, and reached the Elefsina tollgate. Various drivers took videos of the convoy, which circulated on the internet.

“Part of the convoy starts here, Vangelis. These are all Croats.”

There was a police presence in Elefsina, but for reasons unknown, they had been relieved of their duties. After the tollgate, as police officer Dimosthenis Pakos confirms, it was game over.

“Based on my experience in the police, they should have been intercepted right after the Elefsina toll.

Why wasn't it done?

You'll need to ask those issuing the orders.”

But one person in the police had done their job. Konstantinos Christologlou, head of the Sub-directorate for Combating Sports Violence, had compiled five information sheets on the Croatian contingent, along with a 27-page risk analysis report. In hindsight, it seems that none of these were considered. Christologlou was unavailable for comment amid the ongoing investigation into the death of Michalis Katsouris. However, in an interview a few weeks prior to the Nea Filadelfeia incident, he proved to be tragically prophetic.

“One aspect of these incidents that is highly concerning is the frequent use of sharp objects, with all the potential consequences. If this trend persists, it's only a matter of time before we see serious injuries or even fatalities.”

Meanwhile, the police in Athens made 105 arrests that night: 102 Croats, two Greeks and an Albanian, all of them Panathinaikos fans. The news, of course, quickly reached Croatia. Berislav Jelinić, an investigative journalist whom we interviewed last December at his office in Zagreb, vividly recalls his initial thought upon learning of the events in Athens.

“My first thought was that they're idiots. Considering they'd seen on the news they weren't allowed to attend the game, the sole purpose of their journey must have been to produce problems.”

Jelinić, the editor of the weekly magazine "Nacional" and a survivor of two assassination attempts, published the list of names of those arrested, shrugging off any potential backlash in Zagreb.

“My first instinct was "give me the names," because in such cases, it's crucial to expose the identities of the hooligans. I firmly believe that hooliganism of this type should be brought to light. We're not talking about human rights. We're talking about an organised group of idiots who traveled to another country to clash with similar idiots. They just wanted to cause trouble and elevate their status within their fan group. I have no problem with this, personally. This is a kind of folklore. But when it goes out of line, when somebody is killed, I want to shed light onto the whole group, and print in my magazine the message that this is not acceptable.”

Back in Athens, an organised AEK fan spoke to iMEdD anonymously and requested to have his voice modified. Seated in a café in Exarchia, opposite a riot police car, he recounted how he had left Nea Filadelfeia five minutes before the Croatian raid began.

“I went to grab a ticket for the match. I knew that something might kick off, but obviously not in Filadelfeia. No one saw that coming. Otherwise, there would've been folks around. That whole notion was just propaganda.”

He also told us he doesn't see "hooligan" as a bad word.

"I don't see "hooligan" as a bad label. It's all about how people see it. You can be a hooligan without ever laying a hand on someone who's anti-fascist but backs Olympiakos. It's not about the team's management or the corporate stuff. It's about the team and the connections you build.”

The AEK fan at the Exarchia café said that within the complex "code of the terraces" twinnings between fans of Greek and foreign teams are very important.

“Look. Take Marseille, for example. We've established this friendship through a specific club and individuals. It's stuck around. We really clicked with the guys in Marseille back then. And they clicked with us too. This was like 30-40 years ago, when we faced off against them. They loved seeing us all fired up, shirtless, going wild in Marseille. They hadn't seen anything like it. So that's how it all started. Over time, new generations came, and sociopolitics started playing a part. Turns out, we agree on that too. Same with Livorno. We marked a 20-year friendship with Livorno a few days ago.”

Giorgos Zevogiorgis, following the passing of his brother, Michalis Katsouris, received visits and calls from abroad.

“When Marseille recently came to play football, some fans from Marseille came to the cemetery where my brother's buried and left scarves for him.

It's quite touching for people from other countries to come and leave flowers. I even had fans from Livorno in Italy calling me to express their condolences.”

Of course, all this seems incomprehensible to him, having been to the stadium only twice.

“I just can't grasp it. They have this brotherhood, so to speak. It's something that I, not being involved in this world, just don't get.”

Michalis Katsouris' brother met with me in Glyka Nera wearing his work clothes and driving his business van. Michalis lived with his mother in Elefsina and worked in crews that pruned trees for municipalities.

Aside from AEK, he also loved his brother and his nephews.

“From a very young age, he was into AEK and all that. From the age of 15 onwards, he started attending AEK matches regularly. He enjoyed being at the stadium. He'd go to the recently completed one too. He would often go there for coffee, to admire the stadium, and then return home to Elefsina to rest. I could see what was happening and I tried to discourage him from this, because I knew about the deaths and stabbings involving fans of other teams. We feared it might happen to him. But his love for AEK was so strong that he kept going. There was always concern, but not that he would die, rather that he might get beaten up. That was the worry.”

In the videos of the clashes in Nea Filadelfeia, Katsouris, wearing a helmet and holding an object, can be seen running with other AEK fans towards the Croatians. In the subsequent footage, the Croatian group pursues the Greek fans in the opposite direction. Michalis Katsouris' brother has watched these videos dozens of times.

“When you watch the video of Michalis, what do you see?

The truth is, when I watch the video... my heart tightens. I can't accept that he's heading towards his death. I try to imagine what he's thinking at that moment. I can't comprehend it. On the other hand, I see young people aged 20, 25, 29, 18, 15, slaughtered for no reason. That's what I see.”

British journalist and author James Montague has researched the hooligan subculture for many years, traveling across the globe from the Balkans to Indonesia and North Africa. During a Zoom call with iMEdD, he explained that in this world, there's a principle: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

“The groups who are friends with Dinamo Zagreb ultras are automatically seen as enemies by AEK fans and their own associates. Some perceive this murder as an absolute tragedy, often politically aligned with AEK fans, potentially leaning towards the left. Then there are those who veer towards the nationalist spectrum or even the far-right, staunchly supporting Dinamo Zagreb, regardless of what happened. So you have this incredible system of friendships and enemies that exist.”

At one point, Serbian hooligans had taken a banner from rival fans in Italy. Montague explained that this act could be perceived as either the greatest feat or the greatest shame, depending on one's side of the story.

“A group of Red Star Belgrade ultras managed to steal a banner from Napoli ultras and proceeded to burn it. There was much discussion in Italy about the incident. You know, it seems kind of cool to steal flags and burn them. To the outsiders it might seem weird, but to the fans it really means something. It has symbolic value. It means you're showing your strength, just like in the Middle Ages. That's how it's done in football stands today. There's a charm to this, you know. You almost need a translator to understand it, to decode it. And that's the point. Outsiders don't understand it. That's the whole point.”

The release of the 30 Croatian fans of Dinamo Zagreb, accused of the bloody clashes in Nea Filadelfeia that led to the death of Michalis Katsouris, has been decided by the Greek justice system. All 105 arrested in the Nea Filadelfeia riots have been released from custody. As of the recording of this podcast, none of them have been charged with manslaughter or causing fatal bodily harm. The findings from the police forensic lab report viewed by iMEdD have only complicated the case further. On two knives, Michalis Katsouris' blood was detected, along with unidentified genetic material. One knife was linked by the police to a young Croatian, but neither his fingerprints nor his DNA were found on it. Instead, genetic material was later detected on one knife belonging to an AEK fan. The AEK fan denies the possibility of accidentally injuring Katsouris, when they collided with each other, being chased by the Croats. His lawyer points out that the victim's bloodstains were found in another location around the stadium, approximately 250 metres away. At the same spot, as witnesses testified, Michalis and others were severely beaten by the Croats. All the Croats have now been released from prison and are unlikely to return in person to stand trial if they are brought to trial. They returned to Zagreb and were greeted with cheers at the airport. Most of them are represented by lawyer Thanasis Kaimenakis. We met him in his office in central Athens, and he was the first in the investigation to use the term "ultras".

“The ultras phenomenon, when examined on a Europe-wide scale is omnipresent. This subculture is ubiquitous and is steadily gaining dominance. You just can't be cut off from society. Violence is everywhere now. Isn't there violence at parties too? When you tolerate it on one side, it spreads to the other. Unless you set up rules. But when you constantly introduce stricter rules and you keep tightening them, you achieve very little. Set a framework. You may concede something, but you'll get what you need in return.”

Then, Kaimenakis pointed out that "shoot" also refers to firing a gun in English.

“You have to be realistic. The ultras movement and the culture surrounding stadiums harbor primal elements. When I shout "shoot" for someone to score a goal, I'm saying "fire the gun." It goes without saying that these matters require management not suppression.”

In the meantime, the investigation unveils that Nea Filadelfeia wasn't the sole destination for the 102 Croatians now facing charges. A smaller, unidentified number managed to leave Greece the next day. Some of them did so in an impressive manner, as Berislav Jelinić disclosed in Nacional magazine.

“One is the son of an employee of the club with no previous clash record. He was so terrified by the events that he flew back to Zagreb that evening with the team and its officials. Dinamo's President practically sanctioned it. We reported on it later, but it didn't raise any concerns because the Greek police never inquired about this guy.”

Our investigation takes us to Zagreb. In the upcoming episode, we meet the Bad Blue Boys and witness the perennial derby of the Croatian League.

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

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