

Riot police attack Athens protest against Airbnb as housing costs soar

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Riot police armed with clubs and tear gas attacked protesters in Athens last Thursday night. The demonstration was called to oppose Airbnb and other short-letting platforms that have hiked up house prices in the Greek capital.

The attack by riot police came one day after Draconian law-and-order plans were unveiled after the first cabinet meeting of the newly elected conservative New Democracy (ND) government. These include the re-establishment of the notorious DELTA rapid response police unit, with the hiring of 1,500 officers both for DELTA and the motorcycle DIAS.

All security-related departments, including those covering migration policy, are to be placed under a single “super-ministry,” which will come under the jurisdiction of newly appointed Citizen Protection Minister Michalis Chryssochoidis.

Around 80 mostly young people marched through the Athens district of Koukaki. The proliferation of short-term lets in the area around the Acropolis and other tourist attractions has resulted in a lack of affordable housing for locals.

Police and mainstream media outlets claimed riot police acted in response to protesters attacking them with sticks and stones, resulting in two policemen sustaining light injuries.

However, this was contradicted by several eyewitnesses who described the police attack as unprovoked.

A video posted on Facebook shows four riot policemen attacking a protester while two others try to protect him. In the background, passers-by scream at the police to stop, including an older tourist who approaches the police, shouting in English, “Stop doing this! Stop, please!”

A separate video shows a man with head injuries

sitting on the pavement being tended to by members of the public while a group of riot police look on. The man was later reportedly arrested.

Commenting on the attack, the video’s poster wrote, “If this happens on a march of hardly 100 people...on Koukaki’s central-most pedestrian area and blatantly in front of passers-by...you can imagine how far [this government’s] violence and repression can go.”

Speaking to *lifo.gr*, a local resident who witnessed the attacks from her balcony also said the protest had been entirely peaceful: “Young people were shouting slogans against Airbnb and giving out flyers. I did not see any of the kids holding wooden sticks. ... I don’t know if there was a verbal altercation between protesters and police. Even if there was, this does not justify tear gas and violence. ... We’re not even talking about anti-establishment activists or veteran anarchists from the Exarchia district. Just young people who are protesting because they can’t live in their own neighbourhood.”

The same resident described police actions towards one of the protesters: “They beat the living daylights out of that kid. We were shouting from our balconies, but they did not stop.”

According to a survey published by Airbnb in 2016, Koukaki came fifth out of 16 “top trending neighbourhoods.” It had experienced a massive 800 percent growth in short-term guests the previous year. A quick search on Greek lettings site *xe.gr* brings up just over 100 properties currently available for rent in the area. This compares to more than 800 properties in Koukaki that are listed on short-term platforms like Airbnb and HomeAway. The same explosion in short-term letting is reportedly taking place in neighbourhoods across the Athens metropolitan area.

The bulk of these properties, in many cases entire

blocks of flats, form part of property portfolios of mostly foreign investors taking advantage of Athens' relatively low property values compared with the rest of Europe. A Golden Visa programme launched in July 2013 offers five years' residency to real estate investors who spend at least €250,000 on property. According to data compiled by Inside Airbnb, nearly half of Airbnb hosts in Athens have multiple properties listed under their account.

A report published by *Kathimerini* noted: "According to data analytics company AirDNA, the commercial triangle surrounding Plaka and Monastiraki has 1,181 properties, mostly high-quality, generating an average monthly income for their owners (based on 80 percent occupancy) of around 1,625 euros. The second most lucrative Airbnb neighborhood is Acropolis, with an average monthly income of 1,430 euros and 321 listings, followed by Thiseio (1,300 euros and 268 listings), Koukaki-Makriyianni (1,275 euros and 684 listings) and Kerameikos (1,264 euros and 213 listings)."

Just hours after the incident in Koukaki, outgoing Syriza Deputy Citizen Protection Minister Katerina Papakosta could not even bring herself to raise a serious protest, stating on her Facebook page that "the current prime minister has said that there will be no acts of lawlessness under his government...let every logical and intelligent citizen be the judge of that."

Having lost the election, the pseudo-left Syriza has no intention of abandoning its march to the right. Having junked its mandate to end austerity only months after being elected at the start of 2015, the outgoing Syriza government routinely deployed riot police units to attack demonstrations against its austerity policies. Syriza also deployed riot police against desperate migrants and refugees interned in squalid camps such as Moria on the island of Lesbos as part of the European Union's reactionary immigration agenda. The ND government will continue these policies.

It was under Syriza's watch that Airbnb became prevalent in Athens. According to statistics from Inside Airbnb, since 2015 listings have increased exponentially. Meanwhile, rents in Athens as a whole grew by an average of 50 percent—but more than doubling in Koukaki.

Meanwhile, wages have continued to fall. The median income in the private sector is not even €900 a month.

Based on current prices for a 70-square-metre apartment in Athens, more than half this median income would go towards rent.



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