

# Brutal police killing of 18-year-old Roma youth sparks protests in Greece

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More details have emerged about the horrific police killing of an 18-year-old Roma youth in the Greek capital, Athens, in the early hours of October 23. The killing took place in the Perama neighbourhood, 16 kilometres west of the centre of Athens, following a 30-minute car chase.

The victim, Nikos Sambanis, was from the Roma settlement in Sofos, an area in the Aspropyrgos suburb of Athens, 19 kilometres north-west of the city centre. He leaves behind a pregnant wife and two small children.

According to reports, police fired a total of 36 bullets into the car Nikos was in. The sounds of the police's sirens followed by the barrage of shots were captured by a local resident in a video uploaded on the YouTube channel of the Greek daily *Kathimerini* the following day. A second passenger, a 16-year-old boy, was injured by the gunfire and hospitalised. Also in the car was a 14-year-old boy, reportedly the driver of the car, who fled the scene. All of them were unarmed.

The post-mortem report revealed that Nikos received two bullet wounds, one in the stomach and one fatally in his chest. He died instantly.

Protests broke out following the police murder in and around Athens, as well as in the cities of Corinth and Patras, with groups of Roma blocking highways. A main protest was held in Athens attended by around 1,000 people on October 25, which was viciously attacked by riot police using stun grenades and tear gas. Footage of the attack by the riot police can be viewed here.

The initial police report stated that the chase was initiated by members of the DIAS motorcycle police squad in the Ayios Ioannis Rentis neighbourhood, 8 kilometres west of Athens city centre, because they suspected the vehicle had been stolen. The report

claimed that they had acted in self-defence after the car allegedly rammed into police motorcycles, injuring seven of the officers.

By the next morning the official version of the events was already unravelling. In another video shot by a resident and uploaded on the *Kathimerini* YouTube channel, one of the police officers can be clearly heard saying that none of them were injured. This led to the seven police officers being taken into custody at the Central Police Headquarters in Athens (GADA).

Leaks have confirmed that the DIAS squad had been told to abort the pursuit partway through the chase. The bulk of the police briefings, however, continue demonising the three youths, and are parroted uncritically by sections of the media.

Over the next days, stories emerged that the dead youth was a wanted criminal. As it turned out, Nikos' criminal record was clean while all claims of a criminal past centred on an accusation that he stole a moped when he was 14.

To bolster police claims of self-defence, media reports also claimed that Nikos was the driver of the car, even though it later emerged that he was seated in the back seat. Scores of media reports also claimed that Nikos was 20 years old, two years older than he really was. Thanassis Kambayiannis, the lawyer representing the Sambanis family, said this was the police's way of making the shooting appear more "palatable" by presenting the dead youth as a fully-fledged adult. It was meant to divert from the fact that the other youths in the car were also minors.

There are an estimated 350,000 Roma in Greece. One of the country's most oppressed minorities, they have faced chronic social exclusion as well as historic prejudice from the Greek state. ? tweet by Spanish journalist Hibai Arbide Aza, who recently participated

in an investigative report on the lives of Greek Roma, noted that only 16 percent of Roma in Greece make it to 75 years of age, compared with 51 percent of Roma in other European countries.

On October 29, a reporting team from *newsbeast.gr* visited the settlement in Sofos where the dead youth had lived. The team wrote, “The picture is brutal, the roads non-existent, while most shacks are made from aluminium sheets, two beams and plastic canvas—ready to fall down at the first sign of wind.”

Speaking to the reporters, the dead youth’s father, Yiannis Sambanis, said, “We are around 300 people living here. We don’t have electricity or water. We are able to get a bit of light through cables that we connect to batteries... We carry water using containers from a tap downhill. They have occasionally come with buses to test us for COVID, but for the vaccine they have never come. No-one has told us what we need to do. We want to be vaccinated.”

Sambanis senior told the reporters that he works as a rag-and-bone man and is routinely harassed by the police for his papers, telling him he doesn’t have a legal trading license.

In an unprecedented move, senior government figures intervened to lend their support to the seven police officers. On the same day as the seven were taken into custody, October 24, the New Democracy government’s Citizen Protection Minister Takis Theodorikakos visited them at GADA where they were being held. In a statement the minister said, “My move was of an exclusively human and symbolic character, to psychologically support young people who are serving in the Greek Police.”

The day after, October 25, Development Minister Adonis Georgiadis appeared on *Skai* TV’s morning news show explicitly justifying the actions of the police officers, stating, “a car being rammed is considered a deadly weapon, hence the way the DIAS squad handled the situation was entirely justified.”

Police claims that they acted in self-defence were demolished when the 14-year-old driver of the car came forward and appeared in a court hearing on October 27. Outside the court he told journalists, “We were scared in case they were going to kill us, which is why we didn’t stop in the first place. As soon as we stopped we put our hands up and they shot at us. They shot my friend and then I crashed the vehicle into their bikes,

but there was no-one on them.”

On the same day as the young Roma appeared in court, all seven police officers were released without any restrictions until a trial date is set. They were charged with voluntary manslaughter, which all denied. Pleased that his intervention worked, Theodorikakos stated that he was “satisfied” with the decision.

The police killing of Nikos Sambanis and its endorsement by the government should serve as a warning to Greek workers and youth. While Roma are disproportionate victims of police harassment and violence, with police raids in Roma settlement a common occurrence, police violence affects the entire working class. It is not only the efforts by the far-right to stoke prejudices against the Roma that must be resisted, but also the efforts by proponents of identity politics to present the issue of police brutality as a purely racial one.

In a written statement Kambayiannis drew attention to the fact that the police tactics that led to Kambanis’ killing were far from uncommon: “From the beginning of October, the systematic use of weapons by police in similar pursuits in the centre of Athens (e.g., on October 8 in Marni Street and on October 11 at Ayios Panteleimon) as well as in other cities (e.g., in Trikala on October 22), which is later justified by invoking a ‘vehicle-ramming incident’, shows beyond doubt that the orders come from above. The incidents are too many and common for them to be isolated.”



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