

Greek fascist MP given kid gloves treatments after attack on art exhibition

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Nikos Papadopoulos, a member of parliament for the Greek far-right party Niki (Victory), entered the National Gallery-Alexandros Soutsos Museum in Athens on March 10 and tore down four artworks, denouncing them as “blasphemous.” The works were by contemporary Greek artist Christoforos Katsadiotis.

The incident took place one week after Papadopoulos wrote a letter to the Museum demanding the works be removed, stating that Katsadiotis’ works “distort and desecrate the most sacred symbols of our Orthodox Christian tradition.”

Papadopoulos was accompanied by another man, later revealed to be Dionysis Makris, a far-right journalist who presents “For Whom The Bell Tolls”—a programme broadcast through his YouTube channel “Pillar of Orthodoxy.”

While Makris reportedly fled before being accosted by police, Papadopoulos was held by police at the museum for around five hours. He was released after prosecutors ruled that his act was a “misdemeanour.” According to Greek law, parliamentarians can only be immediately arrested for felonies. For misdemeanours, only parliament can rule whether their immunity from prosecution is lifted.

Speaking to reporters outside the museum after his release, Papadopoulos claimed he never intended to vandalise the works. Footage captured by the museum’s security cameras shows both Papadopoulos and Makris approaching the works and then violently dashing them to the floor while two staff members attempt to stop them.

Art, religious imagery and social satire

The works form part of the “Allure of the Bizarre” exhibition which began in January and is set to run until the end of September. The point of departure of the exhibition is “Los Caprichos,” a series of 80 etchings by late 18th/early 19th century Spanish artist Francisco Goya. Katsadiotis was one of 10 contemporary Greek artists whose works were chosen to be exhibited alongside Goya’s works.

The Los Caprichos (The Caprices) engravings were developed by Goya in 1797-98 and were directly influenced by the conceptions of the Enlightenment that embodied the revolutionary upheavals in neighbouring France at the time. They satirise the ignorance and superstition rife in feudal Spain under the yoke of the monarchy and the censorship of the Inquisition.

The most iconic engraving of the series is “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” with Goya’s original caption for the print

reading: “Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with her, she is the mother of the arts and source of their wonders.”

Discussing the works in an interview published on March 16 in *Documento*’s Sunday edition, Katsadiotis said: “I decided to explore these themes because when one goes into a church the first thing they encounter is the faces of the saints on the paintings and icons. I feel that these are figures whose ultimate aim is to transfix and inspire fear. To make you feel so small and defenceless so that if you are to have any worth or status you have to be on their side. Otherwise the threat is great and leads directly to eternal hell, given that they already deem all of us guilty and sinners.

“The faces in these pictures therefore see enemies before them and divide life in hell and heaven. In any case most of these figures are distinguished warriors--look at the clothes they wear and their swords. I wonder how a warrior who sees only enemies and kills can convey the word of God, the word of love, of peace and mutual respect. These are the questions that I want to express.

“I accept and respect anybody’s religion. My works are not icons of worship, but visual works of art. I neither put them in a church nor did I force someone to come and see them. And mainly their aim is not to insult. For me they are poetic works that express human suffering.”

The four vandalised works of Katsadiotis use Eastern Orthodox iconography as a means of challenging the reactionary role of the church in society. The Saint Christopher etching appears to be a self-portrait by the artist—also named Christopher—drawing on the provincial 17th and 18th century tradition of depicting the saint with a dog’s head.

The other works comprise embossed metal sheets featuring depictions of the Virgin Mary and child, Saint Michael vanquishing Satan, and Saint George slaying the dragon. The shining gold and silver has been cut to reveal grotesque, cartoonish faces painted colourfully beneath; presumably a commentary on the dissonance between the church’s portrayal of itself and the reality of its social function.

Icon 1 takes the traditional portrayal of Saint George slaying the dragon, but reverses roles so that the saint becomes a devil, the horse becomes a dragon, and the saint’s spear strikes downwards towards a misshapen human face. Icon 16 shows a crazed Archangel Michael casting a comically pathetic Satan out of heaven. Finally, Icon 17 presents a smirking Virgin Mary holding a perplexed and wizened baby Jesus.

Censorship campaign emboldened by the ND government

Papadopoulos' vandalism has made him a cause célèbre in the mainstream media, with pundits falling over themselves to condemn the museum for exhibiting such works while providing him with a platform to spew his obscurantist diatribes.

His party also fully backed Papadopoulos. After initially distancing himself from the vandalism, Niki leader Dimitris Natsios took to X a few hours after the event to post: "So that there are no misunderstandings, Niki MP, Nikos Papadopoulos will not be expelled. He acted with holy indignation when he took down the unholy, grotesque and blasphemous drawings that insult the sacred person of the Virgin Mary and our saints."

Papadopoulos received a slap on the wrist from his fellow lawmakers after prosecutors referred the incident to parliament. No procedures were initiated to lift his immunity from prosecution. Nikitas Kaklamanis, speaker of Parliament and member of the ruling conservative New Democracy party (ND), merely ordered Papadopoulos' MP salary to be cut by half for a month.

Papadopoulos received the tacit endorsement of Greece's Orthodox Church. Remaining silent on the events at the museum, the Holy Synod released a statement one day later saying: "The Permanent Holy Synod has expressed its sorrow for the content of certain works within the exhibition in question and has decided to take the matter up with the Greek government."

Initially intending to incorporate the vandalism into the exhibition, the museum cordoned off the area with the artworks on the floor kept *in situ*. An accompanying sign under the title "The Symptom" read: "The curator of the exhibition and director of the National Gallery [art historian Syrago Tsiora] has decided in agreement with the artist to visibly maintain the trails of violence and vandalism as a symptom."

Not a single member of the government—Culture Minister Lina Mendoni included—came out to publicly support the museum's stand. Four days later the artworks were withdrawn, with the museum citing security concerns amid protests outside by far-right religious figures. Mendoni issued a pro forma condemnation of the vandalism only nine days after the event and only after a question was put to her by Greek daily *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton* (*The Newspaper of the Editors*). She justified the government's lack of adequate security measures following the attack, saying "we can't exhibit works of art under guard."

This episode has emboldened the Niki Party and religious zealots. Following the attack on the museum there were violent clashes by far-right protesters in Thessaloniki and Larissa outside the venues where standup comedian Christoforos Zaralikos was performing. His tour had been promoted with a poster in which he appeared wearing a thorn crown and red robe like Jesus.

The protests were preceded by a post on X by Papadopoulos where he called for protests against the comedian, stating that Zaralikos' act "contains content that insults the Orthodox Faith and our Virgin Mary", adding, "I am fully aware of the indignation of many of my fellow citizens."

Niki has continued its offensive by filing a lawsuit against the Athens museum over a video projection by artist Eva Stefani which the party described as "obscene."

The threat posed by Niki and the Greek right

ND has a long history of cultivating far-right forces. Following its return to power in 2019—after the betrayal of the working class carried out by Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left)—ND largely adopted the programme of the fascists. In its latest Cabinet reshuffle, Makis Voridis—a notorious far-right figure—was named new migration minister to lead the ND government's anti-refugee policies.

Within the context of the upsurge of the class struggle in Greece, Niki's agitation is a useful tool for the ND government, which is reeling following the mass protests over the Tempi train crash and the subsequent cover-up, which it oversaw.

The imposition of censorship by far-right forces in the arts is a global phenomenon. Last September, the Toronto Film Festival withdrew the film "Russians At War" following pressure from the Canadian government and threats from Ukrainian fascists, with the Zurich Film Festival following suit shortly afterwards. In Australia, an artist and a museum curator recently had their appointments to the Venice Biennale rescinded following bogus politically-motivated claims in the right-wing media that the two were supporters of "terrorism."

Niki's embrace by broad sections of the ruling elite alongside the whipping-up of the most backward layers of the population must serve as a warning: the party was founded in 2019 by Natsios, a theologian, and entered parliament in 2023 in the last general election.

Natsios has close links to figures within the semi-autonomous monastic community of Mount Athos in Northern Greece such as the anti-vaxxer monk Eftimios. He has been linked with the semi-official religious organisations "Zoi" (Life) founded in 1907 and "Sotir" (Saviour), a splinter from Zoi founded in 1960. Virulently anti-communist, both organisations were nurtured by the Greek ruling class throughout the 20th century as a bulwark against the rising movement of the working class. The height of their influence was during the 1967-74 military dictatorship, with which they maintained close relations.

Satirical artworks like Katsadiotis' have a long history: chaotic composition, grotesque forms and bizarre elements illustrate the unreason of a troubled society. During the Bourbon Restoration (1814—1830), French artist Eugene Delacroix--creator of "Liberty Leading the People" (1830) and "The Massacre of Chios" (1824)—took Goya's Los Caprichos series as a base for his own caricature studies of the clergy. Two centuries later, an artist using those same works and themes as a point of departure for his own social critique is still considered a threat by the most reactionary elements of capitalist society.



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