

Greece Tries Stationing Police on Campus, and Students Fight Back

For decades, law enforcement was rarely allowed on university grounds. Critics say that putting officers there is part of a slide toward authoritarianism.



By Niki Kitsantonis

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ATHENS — For decades, the police were rarely allowed on university campuses in Greece without express permission from the school's rector and the approval of a prosecutor, even in cases of emergency. But in September, the government began trying to deploy officers at four universities, stoking vehement protests and prompting accusations of authoritarian tactics.

The concept of law enforcement on campuses had largely been anathema in Greece since 1973, when more than 20 people were killed after a student uprising at the Athens Polytechnic against the country's military dictatorship. But the no-police policy was repealed in 2019. (In 2011, a previous government scrapped the law, but it was reinstated in 2017.)

The current conservative government says the officers are needed to curb lawlessness on campuses. But students have fought the move, blocking entry to the grounds of universities in Athens and in the northern city of Thessaloniki. Demonstrations against the measure have turned violent in both the capital and in Thessaloniki.

And during a concert in Thessaloniki last month featuring Greek artists who said that they stood in solidarity with students, the police used tear gas on audience members. Officers said that they had been attacked.

The university-based force appears to be the first of its kind in Europe, where problems on campuses are typically handled by the school authorities or by private security, and critics say that it is reminiscent of autocratic regimes. Campus police are common in the United States — though they are employed by the schools, while the Greek officers are part of the larger police force.

“It’s coercive repression, basically it’s bullying,” said Seraphim Seferiades, professor of politics and history at Panteion University in Athens. “It’s also part of a slide toward authoritarianism,” he said, citing a wiretapping scandal embroiling the prime minister and the country’s plunge in the global press freedom index.



A rally at Athens Polytechnic in 1973 to protest Greece's military dictatorship. More than 20 people were killed during the uprising. Associated Press

The government, apparently realizing that the issue was going to be contentious, assigned riot police officers to guard members of the campus forces, who carry batons rather than firearms, when they made their debut outside the main campus of the University of Athens in early September.

The no-police policy that was repealed in 2019, the so-called university asylum law, was aimed at protecting students and free speech, but according to the government, the liberties it afforded were exploited over the years, chiefly by self-styled anarchists and minor offenders.

Campuses were routinely used as caches for homemade weapons, and professors were intimidated or attacked, the authorities said. University rectors have been bricked into their offices and graffiti still adorns the walls of most Greek universities. In May, vandals used sledgehammers to severely damage a faculty building at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. The spot had been an anarchist hangout for over 30 years and is now the site where a new library is to be built.

During a campus raid on Sept. 27, the police in Athens arrested 24 people suspected of being involved in a drugs and robbery ring, one of whom was shot after attacking an officer with a screwdriver. Armed members of the ring were conducting inspections on people entering the campus, the police said. The public order minister, Takis Theodorikakos, said that the operation proved that university premises “have been transformed into centers of lawlessness, delinquency and launchpads for acts of violence and crime.”

According to Angelos Syrigos, the deputy education minister who oversees Greek universities, “For decades, a reality took shape in Greek universities where minority groups with no social impact gained privileges by acting as if they owned the place.”

“Now they realize that this yearslong grace period is over, and they are reacting,” he added.

Students faced off against riot police officers during a protest in Thessaloniki, Greece, in May. Sakis Mitrolidis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The political opposition counters that crime in universities is minimal and can be handled by the regular police, who can enter campuses since the abolition of the asylum law. It sees the crackdown as politically motivated ahead of elections due by next summer. “It’s a campaign hand-in-hand with the police aimed at winning far-right votes on a law and order platform,” said Nikos Filis, a former education minister and lawmaker with the leftist Syriza party.

Denouncing a “growing climate of authoritarianism,” Mr. Filis said that the force was aimed at quashing opposition to unpopular changes, including what some see as an attempt to devalue state universities in Greece while promoting private colleges.

The government claims that society backs the changes, and points to polls showing a slim majority in support of the university police.

Students are also split along political lines. Left-leaning unions oppose the measure. In a statement, they have accused the authorities of trying to “strangle every voice of demand and protest” and said that funding would be better spent on campuses and student accommodation. But the union affiliated with the governing conservatives has defended the force as “returning universities where they belong, to students.”

While rectors at the universities with the biggest problems have accepted the intervention, many academics are skeptical, according to Panagiotis Kaldis, who heads the rotating presidency of a council of the 24 state university rectors. “The general feeling is that it’s not necessary,” he said. “Also, it’s a risk: When you provoke, you can’t predict the outcome.”

A student protest in Thessaloniki in May to denounce government plans to introduce policing on university campuses. Sakis Mitrolidis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

And the union of Greek university professors, known by its acronym, Posdep, has called for the new force to be abolished.

There is even concern within Greece's police force as officers have been moved from other duties to guard members of the university police staff.

“Police guarding the police!” Theodoros Tsairidis, the head of Thessaloniki's police workers' union, exclaimed at a news conference recently. “There is no logic in what's happening,” he added. “The police have no business having a permanent presence in universities; that doesn't happen anywhere in the world.”

The deadlock looks unlikely to end soon.

Bracing for elections and with the wiretapping affair under investigation, the government is determined to hold firm.

Protesting students have also vowed to stand their ground. “They have failed to terrorize us,” a statement by student unions of three Athens universities said ahead of a demonstration on Sept. 27. “We’re not taking one step back.”

A clash is inevitable, Professor Seferiades said.

“They’re trying to roll back rights of students, rights that have been won through struggle,” he noted. “There’ll be resistance.”

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