

They don't belong on the force

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AFTER spending months last year debating whether an Albanian public school student in northern Greece should be allowed to hold the Greek flag, the country is now waking up to another question. Should immigrants, Roma (or Gypsies) and people who are not Greek Orthodox Christians be allowed to serve as police officers?

The findings of a new survey conducted by the Greek Union of Police Officers and funded by the European Union suggest that officers are conservative in their views. The majority of the 306 officers polled said only Greek men should be allowed to "serve and protect". Most officers even said the force is no place for a woman.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International's Greek section has repeatedly criticised Greek police for ill-treating Roma, immigrants and Gypsies. According to a report published by the group last year, officers allegedly beat a Nigerian immigrant and then subjected him to electric shock when he resisted deportation.

The public order ministry last year issued specific orders to police officers nationwide to obey international human rights safeguards and treat detained foreigners with due respect and dignity. The six-page memo contained instructions to police and made reference to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and recommendations by the Greek ombudsman and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It said police must be sensitive to migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.

A similar good-conduct guide was issued as part of preparations for the Olympic Games. The 31-page booklet was drafted by the public order ministry in collaboration with the Greek ombudsman. It includes a chapter about how to deal with immigrants, especially foreigners who do not speak Greek.

According to public order ministry records, some 1,000 police officers stopped 5,789 "suspicious-looking" individuals in downtown Athens between June 1 and 20. Only 93 of them were arrested. Ten were undocumented immigrants.