



MARS – MEDIA AGAINST RACISM IN SPORT

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Media Cross-Production for Inclusive Coverage

Media Coverage of Racism in Sport in Cyprus
By Adam Hirsch (PeacePlayers) and Demetris Vroullides

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Cyprus Community Media Centre
Ledra Palace Buffer Zone - Nicosia 1703
PO Box 24359 - Cyprus
+357 226 608 38
info@cypruscommunitymedia.org
www.cypruscommunitymedia.org

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Media has a powerful influence on the public conscious and plays a key role in shaping public opinion. In Greece media is referred to as 4η εξουσία (tetarti exousia) a phrase characterizing media as a fourth authority after the judicial, legislative and executive. Media has the power to guide and misguide the masses. Biased media can persuade the minds of many, while pushing forward the political agendas of a few.

When politics get involved in sport, the media can play a huge role in the shaping of public opinion. On December 8, 2011, the professional women's volleyball championship match took place in Limassol in southern Cyprus. The best team from Turkey, Galatasaray, had traveled across the Mediterranean to face the best team in Cyprus, Apollon. Around 500 home fans packed the Apollon Sports Arena while 50 visiting fans from Turkey supported their team from the other side.

According to an official police report, the disruption began when some home fans began throwing chairs and firecrackers onto the court. Eventually riot police responded with tear-gas, pushing fans out of the stadium. The only documented damage in the report was a smashed police windshield. One man was arrested and released.



"Turkish team fans who came from the occupied area were extremely provocative, enraging the already irritated fans of Apollon" - Sigma Live

That evening, *Sigma Live*, the largest news website in southern Cyprus, began its report of the incident saying that the visiting fans provoked home crowd, including photographs of Galatasaray fans performing indecent gestures. In *Shoot and Goal*, one of the biggest Greek-Cypriot sport magazines, and *Politis*, another Greek-Cypriot newspaper, the police report was simply copied with no further information provided. In all the articles, there was no mention of the players of the Turkish team being targeted by flying objects from the home fans. They simply state that there were incidents of violence during the match without saying who they were against.

The Turkish-Cypriot newspaper *Kibris Star* reported that Apollon fans did not focus their fire only on Galatasaray's players, but they also started throwing objects at the Turkish fans as well, something that was not reported on in other media or in the official police report. The article concludes by referring to another similar incident that occurred a year earlier, when Apoel (from Nicosia, Cyprus) and Karsiyaka (from Izmir, Turkey) met in a basketball match that was also disrupted by the home fans throwing objects at players and opposing fans.



"Greek Cypriot fans threw seats, lighters and firecrackers at the Turkish team's players. Turkish players were negatively affected by the pepper spray used by Greek Cypriot police officers as well"
- Hurriyet Daily News

Hurriyet Daily News from Turkey began its report by stating how Apollon fans attacked the players of Galatasaray. The article goes into detail about the different type of objects they were thrown and includes an interview with Turkish Youth and Sports Minister Suat Kilic who said, "I condemn the Greek Cypriot violence against Turkish... The Greek Cypriots should be banned from all international sports activities as they do not act in harmony with the Olympics spirit."

Mr. Kilic's statement is not without its own sense of hypocrisy. Just 5 years before, a Turkish team from Trabzon hosted the Greek-Cypriot team Anorthosi, for a football match. That match was also disrupted by attacks, this time by the Turkish fans against the Greek-Cypriot fans.

There are some who argue that violence at these matches is not ethnic or political in nature. Perhaps by giving too much attention to the issue we are legitimizing the negative acts of a few young hooligans. Violence in sports, especially in Cyprus, is unfortunately a common occurrence. However there were no such incidents in international competitions with other countries such as Azerbaijan, Italy and the Ukraine. It should also be noted that both Greek-Cypriot teams involved in the incidents, Apollon and Apoel, have strong links to nationalistic groups, a fact that gets little if any media coverage.



Riot police from the Apollon vs. Galatasaray Match

Despite poor racism and violence in sport, there are organizations that are combating this issue. One organization, PeacePlayers International – Cyprus (PPI-CY), is a locally registered non-profit organization whose mission is to unite educate and inspire children to develop mutual understanding and respect for each other through the game of basketball. Since its creation in 2007, PPI-CY has held over 150 successful bicomunal activities that brought together over 3,000 Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot youth. By facilitating regular, frequent, and structured interaction, they help reverse prejudices built steadily over years in segregated communities and foster the long-term trust necessary for true friendship.

In 2010 PPI-CY began partnering the Ministry of Education on a special project to work within the Zone of Educational Priority (ZEP) in Limassol, a program that provides special assistance to schools of need in underprivileged areas (the same areas where many fans of Apollon come from). Their goal was to use PPI-CY's expertise in bringing kids from different backgrounds through sport to bridge divides between the multicultural children in the different schools. The children in these schools are very diverse, coming from Greek-Cypriot, Turkish-Cypriot, and [Roma or "Kerbet"](#) descent. One thing they all have in common is a working class upbringing, with very few constructive outlets available in the neighborhood after school. Teachers and administrators frequently report discipline issues, racist graffiti and interethnic fighting.

There have been many official complaints in the past years, mostly coming from foreign students that involve racist graffiti on school walls, intimidation and even violence. In 2008 a 13-year-old girl in Limassol was subjected to threats and racist attacks by other students who prevented her from entering her classroom while at the same time mocking her skin color.



PeacePlayers works with the kids from the Limassol area

When PPI-CY began working in the ZEP schools, there was very little positive multicultural interaction. In the past 2 years, PPI-CY has worked with nearly 200 kids, playing basketball, facilitating special field trips, and helping out with summer camps. But despite this, the difficulties continue. Instead of dealing with the problem, Greek-Cypriot parents are choosing to move their kids to other schools. One school official, Christos, said "it is more a matter of Greek-Cypriot parents not feeling comfortable putting their kids in classrooms with Turkish-Cypriots or children from other multicultural backgrounds."

The media coverage of racism in sport in Cyprus seems lacking at best. But the problem is not solely that of the media. The official police report was short and insufficient and there was not outcry from the public to hold anyone accountable. From the police to the owners of the sport teams who have their own political agendas, this is the result of an entire society unwilling to recognize its own racist tendencies. But even if this is a societal problem, the media can play a huge role in making change, both positive and negative, by deciding what to show and what not to show.