

# An unemployed journalist among the Idomeni refugees

Antonios Repanas, an accomplished and well-known sports journalist in Greece, found himself out in the cold when crisis hit. Unemployed after sixteen years working on a major national daily, he adopted a completely new focus by going to the Idomeni camp and reporting on the refugee crisis. As a result of this decision, Antonios feels that he is today once again fulfilling his vocation to keep people informed, even though his output is disregarded by the media in his own country.

## Antonios Repanas

Freelance journalist, [www.humanstories.gr](http://www.humanstories.gr)

Translation from the Greek by Kathleen Llanwarne

Images p. 28, 29, 30, 31:  
© Antonios Repanas





much time as possible in Idomeni in order to write about ordinary day-to-day happenings in the refugee camp and to describe the lives, past and present, of the persons and families temporarily accommodated there.

So there I was and there I began to work, in the field, as a recorder of refugees' stories. The prologue to it all, however, had been losing my job and realizing that it would be almost impossible to work as a newspaper journalist in Greece in the coming years, given the radical changes currently affecting the whole media environment.

### 'When a storm hits'

'When a storm hits, some build shelters and others build windmills', says a Swedish proverb frequently quoted at administration council meetings by Makis Voitsidis, former chairman of the Union of daily press journalists in Macedonia and Thrace. From the safety of the 'shelter' where I found myself until Christmas 2014 – as a sports columnist employed for 16 years by Lambrakis, the largest publishing business in Greece, signing articles in *Ta Nea*, the daily with the largest readership in the country, and sometimes in *To Vima*, the Sunday newspaper with the largest circulation – this proverb seemed evidently to refer to the only solution to which any of us could resort should we find ourselves caught in an employment storm. Yet a storm is an utterly different phenomenon depending on whether you are observing it from the safety of a shelter or are out in the open and fully exposed to it. When you are caught in a storm you freeze up and become so numbed by the pain that you can no longer function. All you can think about is where you might shelter, where you can hide yourself away until the storm is over. Under such circumstances, the idea of building a windmill is really the furthest thing from your mind.

The 'storm' in the Greek press began at around the same time as the economic crisis. Over the months and years I saw – as a member of the abovementioned trade union administration council – increasing numbers of my fellow journalists becoming unemployed. There were many with whom I had worked in the past and others whose work I had admired from afar. I knew that these were quality professionals and that, if they had become unemployed, it was because they had been unlucky enough to find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The economic crisis in Greece stirred up additional turbulence in the press. The newspapers had already forgotten that what they were supposed to be selling was quality news reporting, investigation, reliable and up-to-date facts and information. Instead, in the years before the crisis erupted they had been basing their sales on 'offers': music CDs,

At a distance of two kilometres discarded objects of all kinds could be seen strewn everywhere in the fields on both sides of the road: clothes, shoes, blankets, sleeping bags, remnants of food and packaging, rags, nappies. Evidence that thousands of people had passed through this area on foot. When we were half a kilometre away the Idomeni encampment came into view. This is the place through which more than a million refugees passed within less than a year in the course of the biggest refugee population movement seen in Europe since World War II.

It was November 2015 and since Christmas of the previous year I had been unemployed. I had gone to Idomeni with a friend who worked for Médecins du Monde (MDM) and a team of volunteers from 'Argo', an independently run alternative therapy programme. These people had volunteered to clear the fields around the village of the accumulated rubbish. My purpose in following them had been to collect stories in the field

and to write some articles for MDM. An Italian MDM coordinator had been looking for a journalist prepared to come to Idomeni every day to write about the people in the camp. The articles did not have to be particularly dramatic; it was simple human stories that were wanted. Though this particular cooperation project did not in the end work out – because the first texts I produced were considered too slight – it had brought me to Idomeni. My reason for coming there had been to collect stories from ordinary people, and I had talked to these people and heard many of their agonising tales.

Up to that point, most of what we had been able to see, hear, and read on this subject in the Greek media related to the general refugee crisis and the major overarching issues, with perhaps the occasional powerful account of some individual refugee experiences. It was all very piecemeal, with reports focussing principally on out-of-the ordinary events. For this reason I decided to continue spending as

---

**Rather than recruiting journalists, they took on managers and advertising executives, demonstrating ever-increasing contempt for the product that, logically speaking, they should have been supplying to their readership.**

---

DVDs of successful films, books, rugs, electrical devices, and so forth. They had founded their survival on bank loans but there was absolutely no way in which these debts could be serviced from their sales. Rather than recruiting journalists, they took on managers and advertising executives, demonstrating ever-increasing contempt for the product that, logically speaking, they should have been supplying to their readership. The news media, having taken it upon themselves to create this kind of environment, found, when the economic crisis broke out in Greece, that they were simply unable to 'sell' to their readership credible news and factual reporting. Readers turned their backs on DVDs and the other incentives on offer and no longer looked to the newspapers on sale in the kiosks for the supply of serious news reporting. After all, the newspapers themselves had for years been educating these same readers to expect newspapers to contain *not* serious journalism and reporting but merely free offers and DVDs. In such an environment it appears virtually out of the question that any journalist who loses his or her job will be in a position to continue to earn a living from journalism.

The crisis in the Greek press reminds me of a forest that has become full of dried branches and undergrowth. Such forests frequently catch fire and are destroyed completely, after which their rebirth can begin. The field of Greek journalism has already caught fire, and flames consume everything without distinction. They burn fruit trees and wild plants, bushes and plantations. Everything is burned down and has to be consumed in the flames; then the fire will be extinguished and the forest can begin its rebirth amidst the ashes.

This was the kind of environment in which I found myself at Christmas 2014. I remember that many colleagues, on hearing that I had lost my job, phoned and told me that I had no need to worry. 'You have an excellent CV. You'll easily find a new job', they commented encouragingly. Given my employment record of sixteen years writing for the largest-circulation daily in Greece; four and a half years at the third Greek TV channel; three at Super Sport, the Greek subscriber sports channel; two on the best-selling Thessaloniki daily; and six on the highest-circulation newspaper in northern Greece, anyone would be inclined to think they were right. And yet, given the current state of the press and journalism in Greece, I knew that in my specialist niche of sports reporting there was no way I would find a job in the coming years.

I had been a member of the Thrace and Macedonia journalists' trade union council for three years and was well acquainted with the facts of the situation as far as unemployment was concerned. It is my belief that no situation can be more fundamentally uncomfortable. I remember that numerous colleagues would

suggest, 'well, now that you have plenty of time, why not drop into the office for a coffee?' I did go once or twice, but I soon stopped. Early on in my unemployment I also went a few times to the sports ground and there I felt even more uncomfortable. My former colleagues were all working, looking for news, interviewing players, identifying the decisive feature that would explain which side won and which lost, while I simply watched the game and left the ground before the press conference began. My feeling was that I simply no longer had any business being there at all.

### Idomeni as an opportunity

Idomeni represented for me, as well as a learning opportunity, the chance to 'build a windmill'. Without being initially aware of it, I was beginning to cover a significant gap in the hitherto available news about the refugee situation. My initial curiosity to get to know these people subsequently led me to want to enable others to get to know them too; to want to tell the world, in other words, that the refugees are people no different from the rest of us. Indeed, the refugees that I met in Idomeni, the Greek islands and northern Greece, really are just like us. Gradually I began to recognise, among these people and the tales of their lives, my very own family's story. Both of my mother's parents were refugees from Asia Minor: my grandmother, Marika, came from Balya; my grandfather, Antonis, from Aivali<sup>1</sup>. They came to Greece from Asia Minor in 1922.

My grandmother arrived as an orphan with her two sisters Katina and Despina, following exactly the same route taken by the refugees today, from Smyrna to Lesbos and from there to the Greek mainland. Her parents and other five siblings had been killed in Asia Minor. She and her sisters were found, through the Red Cross, by their mother's brother who, having also lost his own family in Asia Minor, adopted them.

On the first few days, arriving at Idomeni, I got out of the car cautiously and somewhat fearfully. Because, ever since 1986 when I signed my first newspaper article, I had worked as a sports reporter, refugee issues represented a completely new world for me. It was in early November that I began to go increasingly frequently to Idomeni. Whenever there were developments or events in the camp, I would immediately post photos or videos on my Facebook page. Little by little I overcame my fears and began to hold more extensive conversations with the refugees. I would ask them about their journey, about their lives in the countries they had left behind, about aspects of their living conditions in the Idomeni camp. At that time the borders were still open but in mid-November, and especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris, the first problems began to surface. The Balkan route was closed for all nationalities except Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, leaving thousands of refugees from Iran, Pakistan and Morocco, principally, but also Bangladesh, Algeria and other African countries stuck in Idomeni. On 2 December the Iranians blocked the border passage and

<sup>1</sup> Both cities are located in the Balıkesir province of northwestern Turkey.






---

## Idomeni and the refugee situation gave me the opportunity to experience a rebirth in journalism.

---

Even those colleagues from other Greek media channels who were responsible for reporting refugee affairs were well disposed towards me. A relevant point here is that I was not in competition with them as, initially, I was writing only on Facebook, later on Aquaplanet, and towards the end on Humanstories.gr. For these colleagues I myself represented a source in relation to events at Idomeni because I was never short of time and was on the spot nearly every day. I could afford to spend hours on end with the refugees in the camp, gaining their trust and learning more about their difficult experiences. Frequently colleagues from other Greek media channels phoned me, in the context of their own reporting missions, with a request for information or for help in contacting someone within the camp.

As from February 2016 Idomeni became the major game board in refugee affairs around which governments and politicians moved pawns that were nothing other than human lives. On account of my experience on the ground, several foreign media channels expressed interest in working with me. Idomeni and the refugee situation thus gave me the opportunity to experience a rebirth in journalism – working exclusively, it should be pointed out, with foreign channels and on Humanstories.gr because, within Greece itself, the situation remains still the same. The fire that began almost simultaneously with the crisis is still raging, forcing ever more journalists into unemployment, reducing even further newspaper sales and the credibility of what mainstream media remain. In the press, the crisis is much more one of management than of journalism. Managers in the media have failed to understand that the environment has changed and that what they are trying to sell is no longer of interest to anyone; at the same time, they lack the courage to fundamentally change their media profiles so as to appeal to a new readership. Now is the right time to build windmills: it is a matter of taking the pulse of the new environment, of demonstrating adaptability, and of being prepared to take risks. ●

the troubles began. Idomeni, in late November and early December, and particularly at night, was not a very safe place to be.

Throughout that period I was posting refugee stories and photos on Facebook. Whenever there was any new development in the camp I would report it immediately, directly from my mobile, accompanied by a short text. Though quite a number of colleagues 'liked' my posts, never did I receive an offer of cooperation from any of them. Many congratulated me on my work but none proposed to host my articles on their web page – apart from one colleague, Stelios Moshoulas, who had a website on water sports Aquaplanet.gr and asked me whether I would like to publish my articles there. This is how I came to be publishing, on a website dealing with water sports, reports on the refugee situation.

### Adjusting to the facts of the new situation

For a journalist who had worked for around thirty years exclusively as a sports reporter, the transition to refugee issues was no easy step. Yet it was immensely interesting to begin investigative journalism in a totally new field. I had at my fingertips the basic principles of journalism; I knew how to seek out sources; I had made a name for myself in the press – albeit as a sports columnist – and this was of help to me in approaching sources, especially in the world of politics and culture, the police, and the Greek NGOs, but also among the local population.

Quite frequently when I gave my name I was asked my opinion of one of the Thessaloniki football teams. On a number of occasions, through conversations about football, I managed to gain access to sources that would have been unavailable to an accredited journalist dealing with refugee issues or a freelance political journalist. While some indeed found it strange that I was writing about refugee questions, many – especially ordinary – people opened up much more easily and were prepared to help me with my investigations because I was familiar to them from my role as sports reporter. What also helped a lot in this respect is that, as I have explained, I had been working for the last sixteen years on the highest-circulation – but also highly reputable – newspaper in Greece *Ta Nea*. It often happens that the media channel for which you work, or have worked, somehow rubs off on you so that you embody particular characteristics in a way that causes people to position themselves differently in relation to you. Generally speaking, it is difficult to undertake reporting unless you represent a particular media outlet. People tend to be suspicious of journalists who say they are freelancers because they like to know where the things they are telling you will be published. Nor are you likely to gain much credibility if you announce that you publish your articles on Facebook. If I mentioned Aquaplanet, the reception was a bit better. Subsequently, after I had created, together with two colleagues, the Humanstories.gr website, I started to feel perfectly comfortable telling people which media outlet I represented.