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Main Features of Immigra- tion to Greece

- The first migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh arrived in Greece during the 1970s. During the 1980s the numbers of Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals residing in Greece grew rather slowly. Ever since the earliest arrivals, irregularity was a typical feature of large proportions of both communities.
- Only during the 90s did the numbers of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Greece start to become more and more significant.
- At present, growing numbers of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are residing in Greece undocumented as, especially due to the difficulties they encounter in obtaining the required number of social security stamps, they simply fail to renew their permits.
- Migration from Pakistan and Bangladesh is male-dominated and migrants from these countries belong to relatively young age-groups.

Pathways of Migration

- Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants leave their countries mainly for economic reasons but also because of political problems at home (especially in the case of Pakistanis).
- Coming to Greece is a long and dangerous journey that may last a couple of days, months, or even years.
- A large number of Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants comes to Greece irregularly, crossing either the Aegean or the borders in the North of Greece. Yet, some Pakistanis and Bangladeshis also enter the country legally with a tourist visa.
- Immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh – visa overstayers or irregulars from the very beginning – frequently remain undocumented for relatively long periods of time. Some succeed to regularize their stay through the occasional regularization schemes, while others apply for refugee status in the attempt to ‘buy time’.

Concluding Remarks

- Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants – whether they came with a tourist visa or not – commonly pay significant fees to smugglers on their way to Greece.
- Turkey is not only a main transit hub but it is often also a place where migrants acquire new skills that may be useful for their future in Europe.
- Greece is usually not the final destination at first but many people eventually stay here due to the fact that they can somehow survive in the large informal economy.
- Many Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who would be entitled to submit an application for asylum do not – either because they are unaware of their rights or because Greek authorities generally do not consider citizens from these two countries to be ‘real’ potential asylum seekers.
- Access to Pakistani and Bangladeshi co-ethnic networks is essential to be able to find employment in Greece. Moreover, such networks also provide many other useful services: i.e. housing, loans, sending remittances, etc.
- Pakistani and Bangladeshi associations in Greece act as mediators between Greek society and their co-nationals by providing assistance in practical matters.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi Migration to Greece

Greece was not, until recently, an important destination country for migrants from Pakistan or Bangladesh. Still, the first migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh arrived in Greece during the 1970s already, mainly working in the shipping industry.

During the 1980s the numbers of Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals residing in Greece grew relatively slowly, though irregularity was already characteristic for large proportions of both communities at that time.

During the 1990s the number of Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals began to rise more considerably. By 2001 the Census revealed there were 11.130 persons from Pakistan and 4.854 persons from Bangladesh residing in Greece.

Data on the valid residence permits issued by the Ministry of Interior suggest the numbers of Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants living in Greece to be declining throughout this decade. In fact, according to these figures, in April 2008, 11.084 Pakistanis and 3.761 Bangladeshis were in possession of a valid residence permit, while in March 2009 there were merely 7.035 Pakistanis and 3.119 Bangladeshis still holding a valid residence permit.

Yet, declining numbers of Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants with valid residence permits do not necessarily mean there are actually less people from these two countries in Greece. Instead, it is more likely to be an indication of the fact that growing numbers of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are residing in Greece undocumented as, especially considering their recurrent employment in the irregular economy, they often struggle to obtain the required number of social security stamps and are therefore unable to renew their permits.

Main Demographic Characteristics

A stable feature of Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants in Greece during the past 30 years has been a rather striking gender imbalance. According to the latest figures for 2009, of the total of 7.035 regular Pakistanis in Greece, there are only 432 women. Similarly, of the total of 3.119 regular Bangladeshis, only 249 are women.

Such male-dominated migration patterns can be explained by two factors: 1) the 'culture of migration' that is established in Pakistan and Bangladesh generally prefers to send the men of the family on a (often dangerous) journey abroad rather than the women, and 2) at the moment Greek legislation regarding family reunification is such that it is close to impossible for Pakistani and Bangladeshi men to legally bring their wives and their families over to Greece.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants currently living in Greece tend to belong to relatively young age groups. Many of them are married but have left their wives (and children) back home as they cannot afford bringing them to Greece, thereby creating a so-called 'transnational' or 'dispersed' family.

The very small number of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children enrolled in Greek educational facilities confirms that only very few men from these two countries are living with their wives and children in Greece.

Remarkably, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants seem not to want to bring their families to Greece unless they can do so legally.

Socio-Economic Situation

Common sectors of employment for Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants in Athens are manufacturing, construction, and the service industry (restaurants & catering, shops, hotels etc.).

Many also have no choice but to resort to street-vending so as to be able to make some form of income.

Regardless of whether they are self-employed shop-owners (minimarkets, calling centers, restaurants) or employed laborers (factory/construction workers, waiters, cleaners), their days are commonly typified by long working hours and relatively meager incomes.

Not surprisingly, they normally try to keep the cost of housing as low as possible by sharing their accommodation (apartment or even just one room) with others.

Both Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants concentrate in specific areas of the city where rent is generally cheaper (e.g. Peristeri, Nikaia, Kypseli and Patissia) and their residential behavior is particularly flexible, frequently residing in one place for just a couple of months before moving on to another place.

Pathways of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Migration

Most Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants claim they are coming to Greece for economic reasons. Yet, although most of them mention that they come to Greece for better job opportunities, a significant number of them (especially among the Pakistanis) then also suggest that they face political difficulties at home. Hence, it is not always straightforward to establish what really is the primary reason for leaving their country.

For Pakistanis and Bangladeshis there are two main ways of entering Greece: 1) legal entry with a tourist visa, and 2) irregular entry.

Still, those who enter legally with a temporary visa and overstay eventually acquire the same irregular status as those who entered the country without any legal documentation. Thus, the majority of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis reside in Greece undocumented for a certain time-frame (which can last up to several years).

In this respect, irregularity indeed appears to be the main migration pathway.

To legalize their stay, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis commonly use one of the two following practices: 1) wait for the announcement of a regularization program and apply for a residence permit, or 2) apply for asylum even if they know that their application will ultimately be rejected.

In fact, applying for refugee status appears to be a tactic that mostly Bangladeshis but also Pakistanis use in the attempt to 'buy time' in Greece. Lately, the numbers of applications submitted by migrants from these two ethnic groups have multiplied more than ten-fold (in 2007, the asylum applications of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis together constituted almost 40% of all asylum applications in Greece).

The Migration 'Industry'

Networks

To leave their countries of origin, many Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants resort to smuggling networks that organize their journey to Europe. Access to these 'professional' networks costs substantial amounts of money.

Hence, in order to be able to emigrate, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis usually resort to the financial assistance of their relatives. Sometimes funding is provided by a member of the extended family that has already migrated abroad, while in other cases the relatives back home sell their properties to support the migratory journey of one of their family members.

Surprisingly, when Pakistanis and Bangladeshis initially arrive in Greece, many of them do not have any previously established networks of relatives or friends here. Nonetheless, in one way or another they quickly manage to get in touch with co-nationals and link up with the existing networks in Greece.

In fact, especially considering the irregular status of many of these immigrants, (co-ethnic) networks appear to be the key for finding employment in Greece. Through such networks Pakistanis and Bangladeshis may also find housing, obtain loans, or send remittances to their families back home, amongst other things.

Associations

There are several formal Pakistani and Bangladeshi associations in the Attica region/Greece. Some of these have great informal constituencies as not everybody who attends their activities is also actually a registered member.

Although these are mainly cultural associations, their most important purpose is to provide assistance in practical matters to co-nationals (help with stay permit applications, asylum seeking, hospital certificates/recoveries, etc). Generally the leading figures of these associations are immigrants that have been in Greece since a longer period of time and can therefore act as 'mediating agents' for their ethnic community since they have more knowledge of the Greek language and are better acquainted with local bureaucratic practices.

Additionally, these officially recognized associations are the main actors in the struggle for the rights of their communities, including for example matters of religion and other fields in which they feel they are subjected to discrimination (i.e. employment, etc.)

Interestingly, besides these large formal associations, many Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants tend to create smaller collectivities with other immigrants that come from the same village or neighborhood in their countries of origin. Commitment to such regionally based associations is generally stronger than to the larger ones, which is reflected in an increased financial contribution on behalf of the members.

The main activity of these regional associations is to repatriate the deceased as this is not done by any official representatives of their countries in Greece. Often, the registration fees of these associations are also used to send a certain amount of money to the families of the deceased.

Concluding Remarks

At present, increasing numbers of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are residing in Greece undocumented. In fact, migration from these two countries is characterized by irregularity. For many immigrants coming from Pakistan and Bangladesh Greece is not the final destination at first. However, people then decide to stay due to the fact that they can fairly easily find work in the large informal economy.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants are commonly employed in manufacturing, construction, and the service industry. Many of them also work as street-vendors. They typically live in poor housing conditions.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi resort to several agents of the migration industry developed by their co-nationals in Greece for various services. Most notably, co-ethnic networks are particularly important in migrants' search for employment in Greece.

The Pakistani and Bangladeshi associations in Greece act as mediators between Greek society and co-nationals, usually providing assistance in practical matters (i.e.: help with stay permit applications, asylum seeking, hospital certificates/recoveries, etc).

Whether people came with a tourist visa or not, either way Pakistani and Bangladeshis pay significant fees to smugglers on their journey to Greece. For both nationalities Turkey turns out to be not only the main transit country but also a place where migrants acquire several skills that may come to use in their future.

It seems that many Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who are entitled to submit an application for asylum do not since Greek authorities do not treat citizens from these two countries as 'real' potential asylum seekers and they are not informed about their rights.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants living and working in Greece face various kinds of problems. The following proposals address the issues that were pointed out by immigrants themselves during the research:

- Opening up more legal routes of entry to Greece would help to combat smuggling as there would then be less need for immigrants to resort to such networks.
- The asylum claims should be assessed more carefully because many asylum seekers from Pakistan and Bangladesh actually really do need protection (either from politics or from environmental disasters). Thus, an independent body that considers asylum claims needs to be created. Furthermore, regional offices at border areas need to be established.
- After a lengthy period of legal stay in Greece (e.g. 5 years), the renewal of stay permits should be for a longer period (e.g. 5 years) without it being tightly linked to proof of employment via welfare stamp collection.
- Income requirements for family reunification should be eased.
- Migrants should be encouraged to attend Greek language courses (courses could be subsidized by the state paying a small allowance to those attending) to facilitate integration in Greek society. In the meantime, important documents and information should be translated into languages such as Urdu, Bengali, and other Southeast Asian languages.
- Municipal authorities and state funded NGOs should be mobilized to provide for a minimum safety net for undocumented migrants (providing temporary shelter, food, some information and assistance in deciding what to do with their lives) rather than leaving people squatting in closed buildings or literally on the streets.



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