

Migration and the crisis in Greek society: the parameters of a coordinated departure

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Greek migration policy over the last 20 years, on the one hand, puts obstacles to the legal flow of third country nationals (TCNs), and on the other, it occasionally regularises their existence and work in Greek society. In recent years certain important steps have been taken by Greek governments (albeit with a delay) towards consolidating the residence status of many foreigners and supporting their socio-political integration process.

Nevertheless, public discourse is still strongly attached to deontological visions of where the Greek economy should be looking at as opposed to where it actually is, and what the backbone of its labour force should be and what it is in reality. The Greek economy did not deflate and does not go through the current economic crisis because immigrants, as it is commonly argued, pushed it into a vicious cycle of labour cost intensive growth and not a capital-intensive growth orbit as the case ought to be. This is how the argument often goes in an ahistorical yet widely endorsed comparison of Greece with developed western countries. The Greek economy has been trapped due to the characteristics of the social and institutional structures that surrounded and reproduced it – via protecting jobs (and therefore interest groups) for whom a sufficient demand or supply was lacking (Maroukis, 2009: 55-60), subsidising and investing in education and business in ‘nowhere’ without any plan considering the labour markets likely to absorb these investments, building, in other words, ‘castles on sand’. Now it has become crystal clear that the populist redistribution of income, the maintenance of the living standards and high expectations of Greek voters during the 1980s, 1990s and most part of the 2000s for themselves and their children relied on thin ground: grabbing of subsidies, state and trade union patronage, and ‘political employment’ (Tsoukalas 1986) at a time of crisis of state-dependent financing, and growth of the loans’ business in the banking sector. The availability of migrant labour was just one of the opportunities to make a short-lived profit.

The other fact (to be discussed in more detail below) is that the Greek economy cannot stand without migrants in the composition of its labour force. However, many of them now return back to their country of origin or are considering such a solution in order to cope with the adverse conditions of high unemployment that are plaguing their life in Greece. This briefing note argues why the sudden flight of immigrants should be avoided and proposes some ways toward a coordinated exit.

Fleeing trends

The flight of immigrants from Greece is a fact. During the last couple of years more and more legal immigrants return to their country of origin due to increased unemployment in Greece. Despite measures such as the reduction of the social insurance stamps necessary for the issuing of stay permits (to 120 per year), the possibility of purchasing these stamps legally and not through black market, the introduction of independent stay and work permits for family reunion stay permit holders, the possibility to cluster together insurance stamps of couples, the introduction of one-year stay permits for humanitarian reasons for those who fail to renew their stay permits, and so on, most of the households of legal immigrants either make ends meet with great difficulty due to the reduced work opportunities and are mainly supported by the undeclared domestic work of women, or do not manage and return or

consider returning back to their country of origin. Seeking employment in other EU countries in a legal manner is an option only for a limited number of long-term residence permit holders, as well as for holders of Special Identity Card for Co-ethnics or EDTO (mainly Albanians). Having said that, repeating the experience of migration to a new country is a very tough decision for most of the immigrants who suffered and eventually built their lives in Greece; the return to the country of origin is their most likely choice.

What do quantitative and qualitative data on the immigration situation in Greece indicate? The Labour Force Survey records a steady increase in unemployment of foreigners since the beginning of 2009, surpassing by almost five percentage points the equivalent general average rate of unemployment during the first quarter of 2011 (see Table 2). In absolute numbers during 2009-2011 the number of unemployed foreigners exceeds the number of working foreigners (see Table 1). Also according to the LFS, the immigrant population in Greece is reduced by early 2010 for the first time in the last 20 years (Triandafyllidou & Marouf, SOPEMI Report, 2011). Last but not least, the fact that approximately 600.000 stay permits were valid in early 2010 and their number at the end of 2011 is around 445.000 indicates a decrease of the legal immigrant population that is probably associated with unemployment. In any case, however, the reduction of stay permits does not suffice in comprehending the volume size and characteristics of the migrants' fleeing trends. After all, renewing a stay permit today constitutes a 'passport' giving many immigrants the chance to leave Greece and have the option of coming back open. This is especially true with the 10-year long stay permit holders (Maroukis & Gemi 2011).

Recent case studies (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis 2012; Maroukis & Gemi 2011) indicate that the shrinking of the construction sector over the past 3-4 years has by and large put the largest group of foreign workers out of work. Migrants that used to work legally in small industries, nowadays work in the same businesses illegally (Fouskas 2010, Triandafyllidou & Maroukis 2012). Even though one fifth of declared days of work in the agricultural sector is down to immigrants, most of them mainly live in urban centres (Kasimis et al 2008). The rural economy absorbs mainly illegally staying immigrants in the Peloponnese, Attica and Central Greece. The region of Central Macedonia gathers a significant number of Albanian (and, to a lesser degree, Bulgarian) legal seasonal agricultural workers (about 10.000 per year), who come and work every year for a period up to 6 months under the regulation for "metaklisi" or "foreign worker invitation scheme" (Maroukis & Gemi 2011). In Attica and Boeotia there is a significant number of Indians and Pakistanis. While in the Peloponnese the Bangladeshis constitute the largest ethnic group of agricultural workers (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis 2012).

The undocumented immigrants and the asylum seekers who are staying more than four years in Greece can communicate in the Greek language, have worked for years in the country and now either work occasionally (many of them turn towards the rural economy) or are unemployed. Apart from looking for work in Greece, they are trying to find a getaway to Europe. Unlike new entrants and depending on the cohesion of their community in Greece, they are looking for relatively safe ways of (illegal) crossing to Europe (ibid.). Most of the illegally staying immigrants in Greece that arrived in the country at some point over the last three years (2009-2011) are constantly attempting to leave the country in any possible way. Greece is a transit country for them and those that are stuck here just try to survive. The recent entrants from Pakistan are a special case since they are usually hosted by legally and/or illegally staying relatives living for many years in

Greece. Often out of the four men living in an apartment only one of them has a job. The immigrants from Bangladesh usually do not work anymore to the degree that they used to in sweatshops and factories. Their main survival strategies are the selling of tissues, flowers or the cleaning car window-screens at the street lights of Athens. Their other 'niche' is working as agricultural workers in the countryside under horrible working and living conditions with salaries that cannot even suffice for paying their rent. Recently arrived immigrants from Western and Sub-Saharan Africa usually sell imitation products on the streets of the major urban centres in order to survive. The main 'clients' of these street vendors until recently were other immigrants. Most of them, including also Somalis, Sudanese and Eritreans, remain in Athens looking for a way to be smuggled out of the country or go to the ports of Patra and Igoumenitsa with the aim of entering ferry-boats heading to Italy. The North Africans who have come to Greece in recent years also try to flee the country. The migrant smuggling networks to Europe, the petty-crime, the organized crime of the drug trade and prostitution are on the doorstep of newly arrived immigrants in the last three years, threatening and also recruiting a small number of them. The deep faith in Islam is the only counterweight to this tendency. Religious belief is the only place where they retrieve their human dignity, where they acquire a face in their underground micro-cosm and pull themselves from stepping into crime. The immigrants who are trapped more than others in Greece are those who have their families with them and those who present a fairly mixed share of women and men in their group composition: mostly Afghans, Iraqis, Somalis. While most of them want to flee to Europe and get away from destitution, exploitation and the increasing racist violence of far-right groups, the number of those who are in despair and express a desire to go back to their countries of origin increases. The waiting list in voluntary return program of IOM was about 2.500 people in 2010. Indicative are the words of an Afghan mother of two small children, "if it is to kill us, it is better to go back and get killed by our own people» (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis 2012).

The difference between a controlled departure and fleeing

In short we are led to the following paradox: immigrants who want to stay in Greece are forced to leave, and those who want to leave are stuck here. In any case though, an uncontrolled fleeing of migrants from Greece must be avoided. For the following reasons:

First, a large part of legally staying immigrants has been integrated in Greece under a high price – that both themselves and the Greek state paid. If they leave because of the crisis, the Greek governments need to introduce measures enabling them to return to Greece at some point within, say, the next decade. The Greek immigration policy ought to take into account the social changes that have taken place in the country's workforce (eg, integration in local labor markets, investment in second generation) and act in order not to lose an important segment of the economically active population with which the Greek labor market has gone a long way during the last two decades.

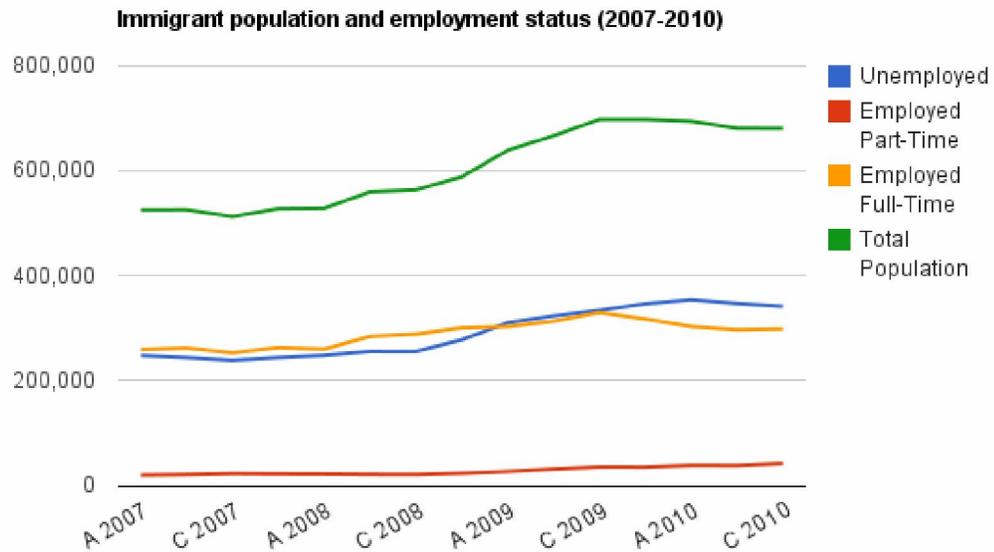
The demographic situation of the country shows further that the Greek state cannot afford to lose the benefits of the significant investments in time and money made for the social integration of immigrants. The total fertility rate stood at 1.5 in 2009, remaining quite far below the minimum replacement level of generations in the EU which is 2.1. According to estimates of the National Statistical Service of Greece, the population increased by 44,716 persons, i.e. by 0.4%, between January 2009 and January 2010. This increase was not so much down to the natural population increase (births vs deaths)

(9,617 people) but to the net (legal) migration which was estimated at 35,099 people (ELSTAT 2011). Moreover, the OECD report for 2010, estimates that the increase of the population in working age will reach 1.9% in Greece for the decade between 2010-2020, when it exceeded 8.6% in the past decade. In other words, the Greek economy will be seriously curtailed if the net migration decreases. The study of Zografakis, Conti & Mitrakou (2007) on the impact of immigration on the Greek economy characteristically proves that in a (hypothetical in 2007, now real) scenario of gradual withdrawal of immigrants from Greece, the jobs that immigrants once had will remain vacant, creating thus significant pressure on Greek enterprises; consumption levels will fall; GDP will decrease; the wage levels of unskilled workers will increase; the income of middle and upper social strata will fall and the deficit in the national balance of payments will increase.

Taking some measures that would facilitate the return of migrants to their countries of origin in the current conjuncture will contribute to their smoother return and re-integration in Greece after a certain time. Looking at the case of the immigrants from neighbouring Albania - by far the largest group of foreigners in Greece – one may understand the benefits for Greece, if it ensures a smooth reintegration of the Albanians who departed. According to the findings of the research project METOIKOS (2010-2011), there are more and more Albanian stay permit holders (with two or ten year long permits) and also seasonally invited workers that maintain employment in Greece and simultaneously open a business or build self-employment opportunities in their country of origin during the last four years. In other words, a circular flow of legal immigration between the two countries is observed. At the same time, and especially during the last two years, there is an increasing flow of Albanian migrants returning to their home country due to increased unemployment in Greece. The strong bonds that the Albanian immigrants have developed with local labor markets in Greece, the fact that they brought up their families in Greece, the geographic proximity of the two countries and the liberalization of visa regime between EU and Albania will leave the window of circular migration to Greece open (Maroukis & Gemi 2011). The bet for Greece, the result of which remains to be seen, is whether that mobility of people and their labour will be legal or illegal. Ensuring regularity through the possibility of renewing the stay permits and thorough other measures proposed below, in practice means maintaining open a passage to Greece for both the existing circular migrants and those who have returned and might return to Albania because of unemployment in Greece. In addition, it means not missing out on the valuable insurance contributions from a large portion of immigrants.

For irregular immigrants and asylum seekers departure is arranged for the time being by smuggling networks whose turnover is alarmingly increasing. Controlling this flight will decrease these networks' earnings and in this sense fight the structures of exploitation and criminality that spring around them with a greater intensity than ever before (subletting, labour trafficking, sex trafficking, drug smuggling). The main reason that immigrants crossing the Turkish border are coming to Athens and put themselves and their families in danger, prey to all kinds of exploitation, is because smuggling deals for Europe are arranged in the Greek capital. The bigger the delay of a comprehensive and sober treatment of the problem of irregular migration in Greece, the bigger its consequences for the country and for the immigrants, both legal and irregular.

Table 1: Range of the employment situation for the immigrants Third Country Nationals (2007-2010)



Source: National Statistical Service of Greece, Labour Force Survey (1st quarter 2007 - 2nd quarter 2010)

Table 2: Unemployment Rate of Aliens

	Unemployment Rate of Aliens	General average of unemployment rate
1st quarter 2008	7,4%	8,3%
1st quarter 2009	10,7%	9,2%
1st quarter 2010	14,5%	11,4%
1st quarter 2011	19,8%	15,9%

Source: National Statistical Service of Greece, Labour Force Survey

Suggestions for a controlled departure:

The Greek state needs to take action in order to facilitate and coordinate the “disentanglement” of various categories of immigrants trying to leave Greece, but also the reintegration of those who might return to Greece in the near future.

- The 10-year stay permit holders should obtain the long-term residence permits without conditions in order for them to benefit from the provisions of the status of the long-term resident as regards the freedom of movement and work in other EU countries. Greece may benefit in the long term by facilitating the mobility of these individuals due to the special ties that they have developed in the country.
- Holders of stay permits valid for two or one years must be able to return to their countries of origin without losing their right to return to Greece after a few years due to an expiry of their residence permit. In particular, we propose the introduction of a 1-year long residence permit for the purpose of 'job searching' for immigrants whose residence permits have expired and have not been renewed since 2009. These immigrants would be entitled to obtain this permit either within three years from the date of expiry of their stay permit or within three years from the date of implementation of the proposed measure. When the returning job-seeking immigrant finds work he/she will be able to apply for a renewal of his expired stay permit and obtain a 2 year long work permit or a permit for self-employment, part time-employment or study purposes. If he/she loses again his/her job and the right to renew the stay permit, the immigrant would be able to apply for a 'job search' stay permit in total three times within a period of ten years. Thus the legal immigrants who are unable to renew their stay permit due to high unemployment and undeclared work can be more flexible in their life choices: they will neither be trapped in Greece, nor will they return back to Greece illegally whenever jobs opportunities arise in their working sector. A similar stay permit had been introduced in the past in Italy and succeeded in reducing the size of the irregular immigrant population.
- Asylum: consistency and continuity in the implementation of Law 3907/11 on Asylum. Focus on creating and manning the reception centres for asylum seekers at the border. Maximum number of applications expected beyond the 46.000 asylum appeals which could not be handled under the legislation of the previous government, without taking into account the future inflows from the beginning of 2011, and assuming that only one in ten undocumented immigrants in Greece crossed to other European countries during 2008-2010 (this number should be much higher): 100.000 from three of the nationalities of apprehended foreigners that are more likely to claim asylum (i.e. Afghans, Somalis and Iraqis in recent years). Under the proper organization of the first reception centres and the asylum system, a significant proportion of asylum seekers would be recognized as refugees and would be able to move to other EU countries in a lawful manner and with respect to the Geneva Convention of 1951 on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.
- Dealing with the current delays in issuing travel documents for recognised refugees by the police. Moreover, integration into Greek legislation of

the Directive 2003/109/EC of the Council of Europe which extends the scope of provisions for long-term residents to beneficiaries of international protection.

- Since the application of the asylum law is delayed and the existing reception centres are not adequate for hosting large numbers of migrants, and migrants' lives in the cities are in danger, the question is: what happens to all those who pass the border and stay in urban centres until the opening of the reception centres? Housing infrastructures are urgently needed for asylum seekers and those with a status of tolerance who cannot be returned to their countries of origin until their cases are examined: self-managed hostels (there are records of considerable numbers of abandoned houses that belong to municipalities and properties of the Church) run by the communities under the supervision and cooperation of the UNHCR/Greek Council for Refugees and other organisations, municipalities and the Ministry of Health. The money for this purpose is there. There are EU funds that are intended to serve this purpose alone not yet absorbed by Greece. As regards work: time-banks between tenants of each hostel. Enclosed market places for the street-vendors from various immigrant communities to put their stands and sell (e.g. Old Market in Kypseli). Recruitment in jobs that Greeks do not do and in sectors from the development of which municipalities may have cumulative benefits: e.g. recycling, waste treatment, residues management etc.
- In addition, it should be pointed out that it is extremely dangerous for both the immigrants and asylum seekers who live in this country and the Greek society and state if the return of the immigrants to countries of origin is not performed when it is feasible and respectful of international treaties as regards fair and speedy examination of asylum applications. Unsuccessful applicants should be repatriated to their countries. For the period 2008-2013 there are already 51 million euros available from the European Return Fund waiting to be used. There are many cases of undocumented immigrants who remain trapped in Greece and wish to return to their countries of origin. The returns to the country of origin and the encouragement of voluntary departure should be accompanied by measures for reintegration in countries of origin. The role of the EU is crucial at this level.
- According to the new Law (art. 24, Law 3907/11) the "non-deportable aliens" may renew their relevant temporary residence certificate/card every six months, if their removal cannot be implemented. Since experience has shown that the waiting periods are often perpetuated and more problems are created in the meantime, we propose to set a time limit. If a "non-deportable alien" remains non deportable after four or six 6-month periods, he should be provided with a "job search" stay permit for one year. Prerequisite for the introduction of such a measure is the full implementation of the Law 3907/2011 on first reception mechanisms, the asylum system and the removal of aliens that run no risk of persecution if returned to their countries of origin.

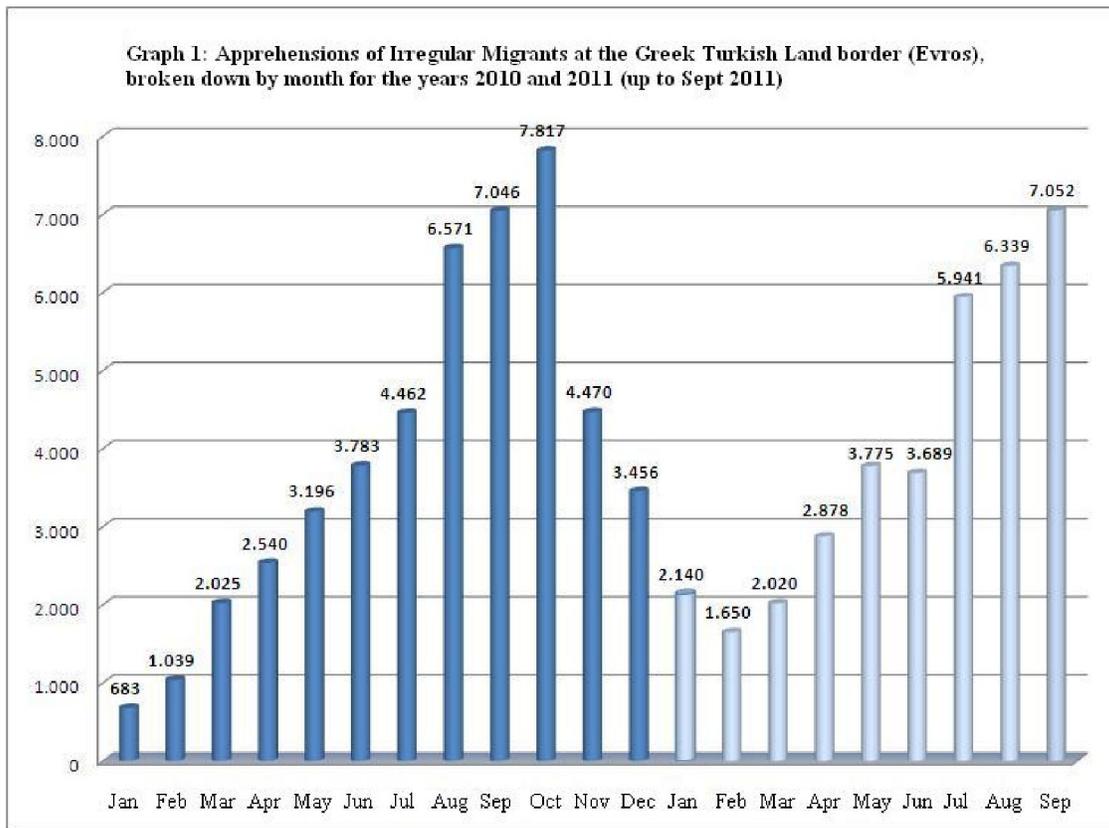
Table 3. Arrests of undocumented immigrants at different borders, 2007-2010

Apprehensions	2007	2008	2009	2010
Greek Albanian border	42,897	39,267	38,164	33,979

Greek FYROM border	2,887	3,459	2,355	1,589
Greek Bulgarian border	966	1,795	1,258	983
Greek Turkish land border	16,789	14,461	8,787	47,088
Greek Turkish sea border	16,781	30,149	27,685	6,204
Crete	2,245	2,961	2,859	2,444
Rest of the country	29,799	54,245	45,037	40,237
TOTAL	112,364	146,337	126,145	132,524

Note: data refer to apprehensions, not to people. Hence the same person if apprehended twice counts twice. Source: Greek police data, www.astynomia.gr

Graph 1.



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