



# IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN GREECE CLANDESTINO



## *Counting the Uncountable: Data and Trends across Europe*

Research Brief

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### KEY POINTS

#### *Main facts and figures*

- According to the CLANDESTINO report, 205,000 irregular migrants were present in Greece in 2007. This is a substantial decrease from the estimates in the 1990s pointing up to 700,000 irregular migrants.

#### *Quality assessment of estimates found in literature*

- All estimates of irregular migration are based on problematic datasets. Estimates released by the media that are mainly quoting politicians and state officials are unreliable.
- Estimates often use apprehensions data in order to describe the size of irregular migration without considering that apprehensions may count twice the same person (caught twice for irregular stay or unlawful entry to the country). They usually do not distinguish between people trying to enter the border and people caught within the country. They also neglect the fact that a higher number of apprehensions may result from stricter enforcement rather than from higher migration pressures.

#### *Main paths of irregularity*

- Restrictive, complicated and lengthy bureaucratic procedures for legal immigration indirectly encourage irregular entry and stay.
- Most irregular migrants come to Greece legally and then overstay their tourist visas or take up work without appropriate authorization. Some enter with false identity documents.
- The size of the informal economy in Greece makes regular work hard to find and keep, even for legal migrants. Informal employment of legal migrants produces irregularity as they often fall back into irregular status because they cannot prove that they have a job and pay welfare contributions.

#### *Relevant policies*

- Preventive border controls and (a posteriori) regularization schemes are the main current policies managing irregular migration in Greece.
- Internal controls on employers to reduce informal labour of both legal and irregular migrants are practically non-existent.

#### *Conclusions - policy suggestions*

- Border controls neither deter nor reduce irregular migration. They only push migrants and smugglers to change the points and strategies of entry to the country.
- Policy efforts should make legal migration feasible. Simplifying the existing procedure for inviting a foreign worker (*metaklisi*) and organising «one stop shops» in administration for the processing of stay permits is an absolute necessity.



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## **THE RESEARCH**

*Estimates and guesstimates of irregular migration in Europe 'travel' freely and uncritically among experts, journalists and policy makers without it being clear who produced them first and how. Their source may not be clear, their direction, however, definitely is: these numbers are routinely used as a means of arousing public anxiety about migration and exercising pressure for policy responses.*

*This study critically explores the sources of data and estimates of irregular migration and, in particular, the validity and reliability of the methods used in their production. In doing so, it shows why and how migrants become irregular and whether and how they can achieve legal status. We also critically assess the policies aimed at tackling the phenomenon of irregular migration.*

## **Background of Migration Situation in Greece**

Early (ir)regular immigration to Greece originated by and large from its neighboring countries in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Large scale arrivals of migrants from Albania throughout the 1990s in particular have turned the Albanian community into the largest migrant group in Greece, followed by Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Georgians and Rumanians. Notwithstanding the Albanian presence which remains prominent to this day, the composition of the migrant population in Greece is diverse. The size of the Bulgarian, Romanian, Georgian and Ukrainian communities has grown during the last decade. Small Asian and African populations like the Filipino, Vietnamese, Sudanese and Egyptian have been in Greece from the 1980s onwards. More recent arrivals include Pakistani and Bangladeshi citizens and in smaller numbers Iraqi and Afghani asylum seekers and sub Saharan Africans.

## **Size and Demographic Features of Irregular Migration**

There are various sources that can be combined so as to deduce estimates on the number of irregular migrants in Greece at present, including for instance the latest Census (2001), the periodic Labour Force Survey, current stay permit data, and annual apprehension data. Although it is close to impossible to accurately determine the size of an irregular population, it appears that the general trend is one of declining numbers of irregular migrants compared to the 90s. This is mainly the result of the three regularization programmes (each with a few hundred thousand applicants) that have been held over the past decade. Still, migrants continue to enter the country crossing the border either unlawfully, or legally and yet later overstaying their visas.

Kanellopoulos et al (2006) in their study for the European Migration Network estimate that there were ca. 400,000 irregular migrants in Greece in 2001 – a figure which goes down to 230,000-330,000 by 2004 according to the study of Zografakis, Kontis & Mirtrakos (2007) prepared for IMEPO. The CLANDESTINO study estimates a total irregular migrant population of 260-300,000 in 2004, which goes down to 205,000 in 2007. For the same year, the study of Lianos, Kanellopoulos et al (IMEPO 2008) finds a range of 172,000-209,000 migrants that are illegally present in Greece.

Considering the sheer size of the Albanian population in Greece, it is not all that surprising to see Albanians constituting the largest proportion of the irregular migrants (34% according to our estimate). Reliable estimates on the share of the irregular migrants originating from African, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries do not exist. The use of apprehensions data is problematic because the same person may have been caught twice – hence leading to double counting.

Regarding age, the majority of irregular migrants belong to the younger age groups. Women are under-represented among the irregular migrant population. The gender composition however may vary in relation to specific ethnic groups: men are over-represented among Asians; Eastern European migration is mainly composed of women.

## **Main Paths into and out of Irregularity**

Greece leaves hardly any option to prospective migrants for a long-term regular entry. The system of inviting a foreign worker (*metaklisi*) does not work in practice since between inviting a foreign worker and him/her effectively getting a permit and starting to work, a period of 12 to 18 months is needed for the paper work. In addition, the extensive informal economy of Greece accommodates irregular work much more easily than legal employment. Irregular migrant workers, be they irregular entrants or visa overstayers, actually play a crucial role for the survival of major niches of the Greek economy: namely, the construction industry, tourism, agriculture and the domestic work sector. Under these circumstances it is no surprise that, often, unauthorized migrants are previously regular migrants that have fallen back into irregularity as a result of the difficulty in finding a job with a proper contract and welfare contributions.

Some migrants attempt to provisionally 'legalize' their stay in Greece by applying for asylum. Their application is at best kept pending for several years – which for some is a satisfactory solution – or at worse they may receive a quick rejection and become irregular migrants. Nonetheless some groups do try this avenue as a shortcut out of irregular status for a period of time.

It should be noted that even if an irregular migrant finds a legal job they are not allowed to legalise their stay unless a regularization programme is enacted. These programmes are the main means for an undocumented migrant to get out of an irregular situation in Greece. In recent years, the two successive EU enlargements to the East have however regularized automatically the stay of citizens from the new member states who were previously non EU irregular migrants in the country. Given the provisional restrictions to access to the Greek labour market for the EU8 citizens initially and more recently for Bulgarians and Romanians, enlargement has made several tens of thousands people emerge out of irregular stay status but has not yet allowed them to work legally.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Technically, migrants headed towards Greece have several ways at their disposal to enter the country regularly: through seasonal labour agreements between Greece and sending countries; through the system of inviting a foreign worker (*metaklisi*); for reasons of family reunification; to seek (political) asylum; to study; or, most commonly, for tourism. In practice however, the preventive conditions that apply to many of these various options of 'authorized' entry (except tourism of course) make it particularly difficult for a third country national to obtain one of these specific 'entry tickets' – an impediment that the Greek case shows to be *producing* (rather than deterring) relatively large numbers of irregular migrants.

At the moment, efforts to slow down irregular immigration to Greece are concentrated around the intensification of border/coastline controls so as to intercept migrants that are attempting to enter clandestinely. Such policies however, do not consider the fact that many unauthorized migrants probably enter Greece legally, usually by means of a (temporary) tourist visa, and then stay in the country after the visa expired, thereby becoming irregular immigrants.

In reality, restrictive regulations aiming to deter immigration do not manage to reduce the determination of numerous migrants from developing countries to attempt to enter 'fortress Europe' at any cost. When there are no 'legal' possibilities to gain access to a country, migrants go through (often dangerous) alternative routes to sneak in clandestinely.

Besides, by now few would deny the importance of (cheap) immigrant labour forces for the survival of the small-scale family businesses that typify the Greek economy in a highly competitive environment.

In light of the above, the CLANDESTINO project study on Greece suggests that it is important to create new channels for legal entry into the country that are in line with its present economic developments.

- Simplify and shorten the procedures to receive contracted workers through *metaklisi*, which, at the moment, hardly works is one policy that should be pursued.
- Enhance economic (and not just police) cooperation with sending and transit countries like Turkey and Albania is another step that would decrease irregular and increase the legal migration flows.
- Last but not least, Greece also needs to invest considerable effort into addressing the extent of its informal economy so as to reduce the ample opportunities that migrants have to find irregular employment and not regularize their stay. Failing to do so would result in a vicious cycle where the needs of the local economy keep feeding the need for further irregular migration.

### **For more information**

The full report on Greece, by Thanos Maroukis, is available at <http://www.eliamep.gr/en/category/migration/>.

Read the research briefings and full reports of the other 14 countries included in the CLANDESTINO project at <http://www.eliamep.gr/en/category/migration/>

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