

## Greek Immigration Policy: Immigration Flow Management Rationalisation Prospects in the midst of the Financial Crisis

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Researching significant cases where the Greek state was faced with the entrance of massive migration population in its territory, one can conclude, that the current inability to manage immigration flows is not due to the lack of managerial and financial capacity, but due to the absence of political willingness or wrong prioritization.

There are two historical examples which prove that the Greek state was able to manage immigration flows or apply integration policies, even when it just came out of a catastrophic war against Turkey.

These two cases, although they differ significantly in the scale of the immigrant population or in its political and cultural characteristics, have a common point; the interest of the Greek state is activated by the existence of Greek ethnic identity on immigrants' population.

So, in the first case, it applied an action plan for managing the entry of Greek population settled until 1923 in Turkish territory. Of course, the Greek state was forced to do so because of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey that the League of Nations had decided, but as we can see, it saw the integration of this population as a great national issue.

In the second case, it legalised the entry of Albanian immigrants, in '90, because it was persistently trying to present the Greek minority in Albania larger than it truly was. When the Greek state achieved its target, it abandoned them, without activating any integration policy.

In 1923, after the end of the Great War and the population exchange between Greece and Turkey, Greece was, for the first time, faced with the task of managing a substantial volume of migration flows, which increased Greek population by 25%.

After the first national shock because of the massive entry of the new population in a state of impoverishment, and Greece's defeat in the war against Turkey, and despite the denial of the native residents to accept that they shared a common national identity with the immigrants, resulting to their social exclusion, the Greek state succeeded in managing this flow and applying integration policies.

The immigrants were institutionally recognised by the Greek state as refugees, namely as a homogenous ethnic collectiveness. This helped immigrants' integration to the national total, during a period that the Greek state tried to capture its ethnic homogeneity, ignoring the cultural variety that existed in the interior of immigrant population.

The action plan started with the establishment of an international independent organization, in December of 1923, under the authority of the League of Nations. We can conclude that the participation of the League of Nations guaranteed the consistency of the action plan's application. One can also notice that cooperation took place on multiple levels – aiming at an effective settlement and integration of the immigrant population.

An indicative example is the budget that the committee could manage, which finally exceeded 12 million pounds and 2 million hectares of land that the Greek state gave for the settlement of the population.

The population was recorded and split into urban and rural groups, according to the initial area of residency as well as the availability of land. Settlements were created in order for a significant part of the population to have access to housing.

Agricultural and industrial labour also played a part. Soon after the immigrants rival and the employers' union's request for cheap labour, the state arranges their settlement in industrial areas, as well as in areas of large-scale commercial agriculture.

The speed with which this project was implemented is phenomenal. By 1926, seven hundred thousand people had become self-sufficient out of a total of 1.3 millions immigrants.

Seventy years later, Greece finds itself in a similar position, having to manage, in the nineties, a considerable migration wave from Albania, because of the collapse of the country's communist regime and the opening of the Albanian borders.

Once again, Greece had to manage an immigrant population that is not unknown to it. A great part of this population belongs to the officially recognised Greek minority, residing in South Albania and being utilised by Greece in order to maintain its territorial claims against the Albanian state.

For many decades, Greece includes in its calculations of the Greek minority in Albania all Christian orthodox Albanians – who usually, but not necessarily, speak Greek – in order to expand the geopolitical limits of the minority. This also relates to the fact that for the Greek national idea, *Greekness* finds its nucleus in religion (the Greek – orthodox is a Greek) whereas for the Albanian national idea, Albanian is the Albanian speaking.

Greece continued the same policy after the opening of the Albanian borders, recognizing every Albanian immigrant whose first or last name was Greek as a member of the Greek minority – the religion could not be identified, because Albania was an officially atheistic state, so it was concluded by the name. The knowledge of the Greek language was not a necessary criterion.

The decision of the Greek state to reinforce the Greek identity of Albanian immigrants by providing them with a special 'aliens of Greek origin' identity card procedure resulted in immigrants competing in order to prove their *Greekness* – whether this was truly the case or not. Even the Albanian Muslims or atheists were baptised in the rivers

along the albanian – greek borders. Eventually, over two hundred twenty thousand people in total received this card.

It can also be easily observed that the Greek state was persistently trying to invent a large Greek minority supposedly extending beyond its official limits. In doing so, the Greek state attempted to redefine specific areas, which were for decades under its influence, as Greek.

In terms of the humanitarian management there was no consistency. It hastily created reception centers, which were effectively army camps, where Albanian immigrants were thrown only in order to be given – in certain cases – the previously mentioned identity card, without the existence of an organized record.

They were then released with no provision for their settlement or integration into the society or labour market whatsoever. In this way, Albanian immigrants spread around the country, faced with the suspicion of the Greeks, who already have a historical record of failing to accept otherness, even when it demonstrates common ethnic elements, such as language, religion, or even a common perception of a motherland. They are guided by their own networking centres, such as friends and relatives already in Greece, or by their access to the labour market.

No provision was made towards the integration of immigrants in the labour market, either. The restructuring of the Greek economy before the nineties had already led to a redistribution of labour forces between industries. The Greeks headed towards service-oriented private and public sectors, which resulted in a lack of elementary workforce. Similarly, the participation of women into the labour market created the need for house labour. As a result, the incoming immigrants were called upon in order to fill these gaps. This was a clear outcome of a self-regulated labour market, in conjunction of course with a significant drop in wages by half and an increase in uninsured work, due to the absence of the state in regulating immigrant wage.

Although, during the next decades, the Greek state recognized the incoming immigrants as 'aliens of Greek origin', it did not allow them to apply for Greek citizenship, prolonging thus the uncertainty of their status. In this way, the Greek state maintained the possibility of this population to return to Albania, in order to strengthen the Greek minority in Albania, which was demographically weakened. On the other hand, although the Greek state refused to regulate the immigrants' entrance in the labour market, it utilized this uncertainty, in order to maintain the flexibility of the immigrants' entrance or exit, depending on the needs of the domestic labour market.

Since the '90s, however, the need to manage immigration flows from Albania is not as central. Greece becomes a popular destination for large numbers of immigrants from East Europe, Asia and Africa, due to certain geopolitical developments in these three continents, as well as the tightening of other European countries' borders; but, in the case of Albanian immigrants, Greece exhausted its limited ability to manage immigration flows.

In the Greek immigration map, the Albanians are the majority of the legally resident nationals of third countries. All other important immigrant communities remain illegal. This is an important difference between Greece and other European countries. The Greek state's reluctance to establish a realistic framework for managing the illegal immigration population, in terms of reception, return and residence, is evident.

For decades, the Greek state allowed the exploitation of the asylum system by ten of thousands of illegal immigrants (in their majority from Pakistan and Georgia), who, although not entitled to asylum, applied, in order to stay in the country sometimes for over 10 years, since the application system was defunct and applications were never actually considered. In 2009, when the new asylum service came in operation, Greece had already received 16.000 new applications, becoming 8<sup>th</sup> in Europe and 10<sup>th</sup> in the world in the number of asylum applications.

Currently, it takes a significantly reduced amount of time for asylum applications to be examined. This, however, means that the number of immigrants' changes, when one takes into consideration all those asylum applicants, until recently legally residing in Greece, whose applications are now considered and rejected. Although until recently many of them were granted asylum for humanitarian reasons in the International Protection, a debate is now taking place in Greece, to abolish this policy, without, however, the aim to replace it with some other regulation of similar nature, as the permit of residence for humanitarian or exceptional reasons that already exists for twenty years in the Greek immigration legislation.

With almost 600.000 legal immigrants, the majority of whom are Albanian (400.000), the major issue for Greece is the lack of any realistic estimate of the number of illegal immigrants currently residing in the country. In addition, existing immigration legislation does not address the heterogeneity demonstrated by the illegal immigrant population.

Despite not being entitled to any documentation whatsoever, a significant part of the immigrant population finds itself in the margins between social exclusion and integration; fully integrated on a social level and in the labour market, on the one hand, but totally excluded from any transaction with the state as non-existent, on the other.

Another part of the immigrant population experiences conditions of complete social and labour exclusion, mainly due to the financial crisis. No opportunities for social integration seem to exist, since this could only take place through employment, which at the moment appears virtually impossible.

The financial crisis, which Greece undergoes at the moment, has been developing particularly fierce characteristics since 2009. It generated a new class of illegal immigrants, who, while residing in Greece legally for decades under a residence status for employment purposes, now, they lose their jobs, and, unable to find new ones, they also lose their rights to residency and subsequently fall into illegality.

The only part of the immigrant population which participates in a final process of social and political integration, eventually resulting in the acquisition of Greek Citizenship, is that featured in the Greek Citizenship Legislation review. From now on, Greek Citizenship is not defined in terms of 'blood right', but in terms of political consciousness of belonging to the Greek nation.

There is no provision for any other group of immigrants. In 2009, Greece was successful in devising a complete action plan for the management of the immigration flow, which was received positively by the European Commission. Despite the European promise of financial or technical support, the implementation of the action plan stopped immediately after the establishment of the law about the reform of the asylum system and migration management.

This law established the foundation for a rationalisation of Greek immigration policy, starting with the creation of a database with the biometric information of illegal immigrants. However, these strategies are undermined by the severe incompetency of Greek police and administration and the inability of the Greek state to implement the respective legislation. The innovations of this law remain inactive or are incorrectly implemented.

Effectively recording and classifying illegal immigrants would enable a significant part of the immigrant population, who finds itself excluded and unable to work, to return to their country of origin. Greece, however, is unable to facilitate the return of illegal immigrants due to the absence of political initiative for reaching international agreements. As a result, the relevant European funds remain inactive.

As the Greek state cannot authorise the return of illegal immigrants, legislative tools which could be employed in order to manage the illegally residing population are not enforced. For example, whereas law about the reform of the asylum system and migration management mandates a deferral of removal status, which, if enforced, could facilitate the recording of illegal immigrants, this remains inactive, with the exception of three hundred immigrants who were assigned such status after 44 days of hunger strike. In addition, the status in question allows immigrants to work until their return, so as not to constitute a burden for state budget. This could, in theory, put an end to the national insurance funds' detrimental losses which result from illegal immigrant employment.

As a matter of fact, the relative EU directive, which includes particularly severe penalties for those illegally employing immigrants, was approved by the Greek parliament, but never enforced. Similarly, the option for employers to register illegal immigrants, thereby securing their participation in national insurance and the health service was withdrawn after objections from the conservative parties, because it was seen as an indirect legalisation of immigrants.

There is only an innovation of the law that in theory continues to be valid. Until this year public officers were not allowed to interact with illegal immigrants, except police and health workers in public hospitals. Because of the directive,, illegal immigrants can from now on report their employer for abusive work practices and be protected by a special residence permit, after a relevant decision by the prosecutor.

Also, immigrant detention centers based on international standards for human rights, although thoroughly designed in the 2009 action plan, were never constructed; with just one exception of doubtful standards, constructed by a minister of the previous government to house two hundred twenty illegal immigrants, only fifteen days before the last elections, when unofficial estimates speak of 500.000 illegal immigrants in Greece. One minister actually suggested turning ships into detention centers!

The vast majority of Greek immigration law remains irrational and outdated. Every migrant that entered Greek soil after 2005 has no means to legalize his or her status. And there are many.

Indicative is the case of the law about the entry and residence of third country nationals in Greece. The law simplified administratively the permit of residence for labour purposes and introduced in the Greek legislation the family reunification. On the other hand, the law was placing obstacles to the development of the immigrant entrepreneurship, defining 60.000 Euros as minimum fees per year, so that immigrants can be allowed to participate in any business procedure. Also, the process of inviting immigrants for professional purposes is particularly time-consuming and does not take into consideration either the needs of the labour market or the large number of illegal immigrants which already exceeds the needs of the labour market in the invitations-related sectors.

## Conclusion

### Public Discourse: From Indifference to Victimisation

A significant and enduring finding, which accurately reflects the absence of real political willingness to solve the immigration problem, is the insufficient coordination between the involved agencies. At least five ministries (Interior, Labour, Health, Foreign Affairs and Public Order) are directly involved in the planning of immigration policy. In addition, three different authorities are involved in the implementation of any such policy.

Although the need for coordination and cooperation among all parties involved is extremely urgent, the latest effort by the state to activate the Interministerial Committee for Immigration Policy ended disappointingly after just two informal meetings. The lack of coordination is due to conflicting interests, which often lead to contradictory strategies.

Recently, the issue of immigration and its management by the state have been occupying a central position in public discourse. The primary reason is not the state's honest intention to implement a responsible and effective immigration policy, but to take advantage of the generalised xenophobic sentiment. as this is generated by the financial crisis; Also, to escape criticism over its incompetency to face the crisis, and to maintain social cohesion.

Thus, the previous government, under the pretext of public health and supposedly due to the increase in criminal offences, implemented a policy of mass 'sweeps' without, however, having secured the appropriate infrastructure for the detainment of illegal immigrants, or taking into consideration the particularities of different groups –

trafficking victims, for example – or grouping them according to age – for example unaccompanied minors.

The current popularity of the neo-Nazi party is indicative of the recent political and social developments. The bullying, beating and murderous attacks by followers of Golden Dawn against immigrants are increasing rapidly. One month ago a 23 year old student chased and killed an Albanian who tried to rob his house. The shocking reality was not the murder itself or the rise in robberies committed by immigrants but the positive response to this murder by a great part of society.

Still, the social integration of the immigrants, especially of Albanians, remains important even today. Despite the total absence of the Greek state from this process, a significant part of the immigrant population has totally transferred its living standards from its country of origin to Greece.

However, the current election victory of the Greek right, on the 17th of June, shows that the rationalisation of the immigration policy will be postponed once again. The Greek right has already announced the withdrawal of the citizenship legislation on the grounds that such legislation will only attract new immigrants. It has also announced the unconditional return of illegal immigrants to their countries of origin, even if such a policy cannot be implemented without the necessary bilateral agreements. In addition, one can only expect such developments to exacerbate the already negative Greek public opinion, especially during the current, particularly intense political situation.