

European Union and Migration: The case of Greece

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Migration is a global and complex phenomenon that requires an overall vision and a comprehensive, coherent and long-term approach that addresses the root causes of migration. Migration is at the heart of the political debate in the EU and, for a few years now, is one of the strategic priorities of the external relations of the Union. Carefully managed, it can be a positive factor for growth and success of both the Union and the countries concerned.

Nowadays, Europe faces an interesting set of immigration challenges and opportunities: Demographic pressures as many European societies age, a lively and at times tense policy and political debate over questions of identity and immigrant integration, and a unique policy environment that has knit 28 European countries together with regards to the management of outer borders, asylum, and other immigration-related topics. Currently, many developing countries, without adequate migration or labor policy frameworks, rely substantially on migrant labor force for their economic development. Migrants are vulnerable and susceptible of being victims of forced labor, in particular in sectors such as domestic work. They also represent an easy target for human trafficking networks.

Migration is a priority under the EU's development cooperation policy. European Migration Policy today includes policies on legal migration, irregular migration, borders, visa, a Common European Asylum System and the external dimension. In addition, the European Union has an Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund to support Member States with the efficient management of migration flows and the implementation, strengthening and development of a common European approach to asylum and immigration. However, the Common European Asylum System appears unable to handle sudden flows of people from conflicts, such as those in Syria and Iraq. Member states need to establish systems for allowing the rapid resettlement of people displaced by conflict. The EU should establish mutual recognition of asylum claims between countries, to make responsibility sharing easier to put into practice.

Treating migrants badly, i.e., denying equal rights and subjecting them to detention - has not deterred migrants from continuing to come to the EU. Excluding migrants from access to employment, housing, health care and education creates irregular communities outside the protection of the law.

This abets abusive employers, smuggling and organized crime. Rules requiring landlords and employers to treat migrants differently risk racial discrimination against settled communities.

Laws that allow migrants to live a normal life during their stay in Europe can encourage self-direction and integration, reducing the need for state support and challenging anti-migrant feeling. European countries should severely restrict or end the detention of migrants. Detention, sometimes in overcrowded and squalid conditions, is harmful to the migrants affected. Individual migrants who commit crimes should answer to criminal laws applying to everyone. These are straightforward ideas, consistent with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

In Greece, the much-discussed illegal immigration phenomenon presents a security challenge to the country and to Europe in general. This is the aspect of the issue most discussed in the national and global media. Indeed, it is the broad convergence of organized crime, the gray economy, politics and white-collar activities that truly characterizes the Greek human trafficking industry, making it an indispensable part of overlapping licit and illicit economies for many countries- making it a key global industry today.

Illegal immigration in Greece is mainly characterized by its transitory nature. Greece is the central axis in the “Anatolian geopolitical corridor,” collecting and distributing Asian, Middle Eastern and African immigrant masses into the EU, through primarily Italy but also the Balkans. The process that has been developing over the past 25 years - and in particular over the last decade - is also marked by a distinct and heavy presence of transnational smuggling networks which are interwoven with the criminal structures that deal in narcotics, arms and counterfeit products between East and West.

The first step in the process, and thus the first player in the overall industry, is the external syndicate structure that transports migrants from other countries towards the Greek borders. The major center of these crime groups is Turkey, though not only Turkish nationals participate. Thus, given the recent land transport restrictions, immigrants are mostly transferred via the use of small boats from the Aegean coast and, in the cases of the Marmara Sea and the Turkish Mediterranean coasts, by old vessels.

Once immigrants are in Greece, most of them are intercepted by the Coast Guard or Police border guards. Those escaped, usually arrive in the urban metropolis of Athens. Those with little money quickly become “soldiers” of essentially ethnic mafia groups, forced to sell counterfeit products, small doses of drugs, work in makeshift garment production facilities, cleaning, tourism support and so forth. The rest are usually people who have relatives or friends already established in Greece or in other EU countries, and arrange for them to find a shelter or send them money via Western Union and similar cash transaction platforms.

At this stage another type of smuggling network comes into places, i.e., the one transporting people from Athens further into Europe. This sector of crime utilizes a thriving forged papers market (for EU-country identity cards and passports). The interlude period during which the immigrants are in “limbo” provides further secondary roles for migrants, and income for housing slum lords, providers of sexual services, narcotics and cheap tobacco suppliers for a large number of predominantly young Asian and African males. The grand total of the human trafficking sector in Greece sums up to more than B2.5€, annually. Although the numbers fluctuate, there are >1,000,000 illegal immigrants living in Greece at any given time.

The most ironic aspect of the illegal immigration industry in Greece is that it provides substantial income for not only organized crime bosses and complicit local actors, but for significant numbers of white-collar domestic and international actors. Considering that these actors shape the official response mechanism to the problem of immigration, and thus the public discourse about it, it is no surprise that they do not tend to discuss the inherent profitability of their enterprise. This pernicious reality involves two basic truths: the tendency for public institutions to expand if left unchecked; and the desire of the private sector towards maximal profit.

In the general industry of organized human trafficking in Greece, there is a perverse sort of symbiosis between not only the exploiters and the exploited, but fundamentally with the outside actors attempting to deal with the problem. And this is without even considering the financial gains made by political parties based on immigration stances. A perpetuation of the status quo thus remains in many people’s financial or ideological interest.

While the recently-established government coalition in Greece is in agreement over defiance of the foreign-imposed anti-austerity measures, their different orientations towards immigration are fundamental and deep. Therefore, any intensification of public discourse or political activity from other parties on this topic could create friction within the coalition, leading to further political instability. This instability, ironically, may benefit the organized crime sector further, as it damages the conditions required for attracting foreign investment and job growth. Outside of the political parties themselves, the overwhelming percentage of the Greek population continues to show little tolerance for immigrants. The situation in general, especially at a time when the poor economy has dealt a serious blow to national pride and self-confidence, is creating an ideal condition for hostile reactions to the ‘others’ already seen to be a menace to society. In general, the migration increases will cause further intergovernmental strains and a possible significant rift between public opinion and governmental structures. This will benefit extreme political parties the most. And this is a real and significant danger for the Democracy in Greece.