

# Making a success of integrating immigrants into the labour market

Dionisis Balourdos  
National Centre for Social Research (EKKE)

## 1. Introduction

When approaching the issue of immigrants' integration in the Greek society, a number of specific characteristics should be pointed out. Greece has traditionally been a country sending rather than receiving migrants and there was no substantial immigration till the late 1980s. Gradually, due to international developments, political upheavals in the neighbouring countries, easier communications, political crises in the Near and Middle East, changes in the migration and asylum routes and economic growth in Greece, the situation changed dramatically and the country became a popular entry point for migrants. As a result, since the 1990s, an increasing number of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) entered the country illegally, whether in an attempt to reach Europe at all costs, or to settle in Greece. The massive influx of immigrants cannot be isolated from the fact that Greece is a country situated at the external borders of Europe, with a total of 700 km and 1500 km of maritime borders in the East and the South – almost impossible to guard and secure - and, with another 114 miles of border land along the river Evros in the North-East.

The growth of the migrant population was huge and sudden and put the country's, as well as the society's, capacity to integrate them to the test. An indication of this rapid growth is the significant increase in the number of TCNs / population from non-EU countries who have acquired the Greek citizenship,<sup>1</sup> from 1,900 in 2003 to 16,900 in 2008.<sup>2</sup> In 2009 alone, 15,925 asylum applications were received.<sup>3</sup> In 2009, the proportion of foreigners in the total population was 8.3%, higher than the EU-27 average (6.4%). The overwhelming majority of foreigners are TCNs (6.8%), of which the Albanians constitute by far the largest group (over 60%). However, if we include the "undocumented" immigrants<sup>4</sup> in the above numbers, the actual percentage of immigrants in Greece rises to 10%.

Rapid employment growth provided immigrants with plenty of opportunities in the labour market, both formal and informal. Undoubtedly, their employment has been concentrated in the low-skilled jobs, in traditional sectors of the economy such as building and construction, personal services, wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants. The majority of migrant workers are

---

<sup>1</sup> L.3284/2004: Foreigners can obtain Greek citizenship provided they are at least 18 years old and have resided in Greece for at least 7 years. L.3838/2010 includes the automatic acquisition of the Greek citizenship by birth for third generation immigrants and the right for second generation immigrants to acquire the citizenship either by birth, provided their parents are legal permanent residents in the country for at least five consecutive years, or after having attended and successfully completed at least six classes of a Greek school in Greece.

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, 2010b.

<sup>3</sup> During the 1st quarter of 2010, the main countries of origin for applications are: Pakistan (385), Georgia (305), Albania (185), Bangladesh (180), Afghanistan (165) and other countries (975).

<sup>4</sup> As for the legal status of documented immigrants living in Greece, most permits are of 1-2 years duration and are awarded for dependent employment (around 70%). During the first half of 2009, 7,579 persons were granted an initial residence permit for the purpose of employment (all categories). The total number of residence permit holders for the purpose of employment (including any project or service provision) on 30.6.2009 amounted to 243,803, while the foreign population that legally resides in Greece is estimated at 650,000 people. Ministry of Interior, Decentralization and e-Governance, 2009.

willing to accept atypical and precarious employment, the so called '3D'-jobs' (dirty, dangerous and demanding work) in the secondary labour market, which are low paid and rejected by the domestic labour force.<sup>5</sup>

Today, the situation differs significantly as - for the first time in recent years- during the first quarter of 2009 the unemployment rate of foreigners actually surpassed that of the natives. According to current estimates, in 2009 the employment and unemployment rates of foreigners/ citizens of countries outside the EU-27 (67.7% and 10.3% respectively), were higher than those of the native population (60.7% and 9.5% respectively), and of the EU-27 average (55.7% and 10.1%).<sup>6</sup> This situation remained unchanged throughout 2009 and 2010, indicating that the current Greek economic crisis has affected the foreigners more than the natives. Moreover, migrants face a higher risk of belonging to the category of the 'working poor': the in-work poverty rate is 13% for the Greeks born in Greece, 19% for those born abroad (in general) and 21% for those born abroad with a foreign nationality.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Brief note on the institutional framework and the policy context in Greece

The institutional framework regarding immigrants consists of law 3386/2005 on "the entry, stay and social integration of third countries' citizens in the Greek territory".<sup>8</sup> This law establishes the integration of the stay permit and the work permit<sup>9</sup> which is granted initially for a year with the perspective to be renewed for another 2 years from time to time, provided the third country citizen has fulfilled his/her fiscal (tax) obligations, has entered into a contract for the provision of dependent work on monthly earnings equal at least to the unskilled worker's earnings and has completed a minimum number of wages, as contemplated by the applicable legislation. In case an immigrant is fired or resigns during the force of the stay permit, he/she may legally remain in the country until the expiration of his/her stay permit, and apply for its renewal as long as he/she complies with the requirements set for the renewal of the stay permit for work purposes.

<sup>5</sup> Balourdos, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Ludovici, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Karantinos, Manoudi, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> And of the complementary provisions of law N. 3536/2007, 3731/2008, 3772/2009, N. 3801/2009.

<sup>9</sup> The access to the labour market for the carrying out of profits-making activities for the third countries' citizens is allowed on condition of holding a work permit for:

- a) dependent work or services or work provision;
- b) seasonal work;
- c) an independent economic activity;
- d) the development of an investment activity;

Third countries' citizens applying for a stay permit for one of the above-mentioned categories ought to have obtained a special entry visa in Greece on such ground. The above work permits are in lieu of a work permit.

This law also made an effort to legalize undocumented migrants. It offered the possibility to grant a residence permit to third country citizens residing illegally in Greece that could prove by specific means their stay until 31.12.2004. The proof of such citizens' stay was effectuated either by a stay permit that had been granted until 30-6-2004 and had not been renewed, or by an entry visa into the country, or by the submission of an application for the granting of a stay permit for humanitarian reasons, or by the granting of a taxpayer's number, or the certification of stamps payment to an insurance carrier, or the decision for the rejection of a sanctuary granting. Third countries citizens' spouses submitted an independent application and obtained an individual residence permit. Residence permits having been granted as per the legalization procedure lasted for a year and were given instead of work permits.

The Law 3536/2007 establishes a “National Committee for the Integration of Migrants” within the Ministry of Interior, Decentralization and e-Governance: that is an intergovernmental administrative instrument composed by representatives from different levels of central, regional and local government, as well as social partners and civil society representatives. This Committee is, among others, in charge for the comprehensive Action Plan ‘ESTIA’ for the social integration of the foreign population, legally established in the country.<sup>10</sup> It is a “set of actions” with a “holistic approach” of the Greek policy towards the urgent need to safeguard social coherence, provide better access to services for migrants and increase their involvement in all aspects of social, public and private life, leading to their empowerment in order to be able to achieve “feasible and independent participation regardless of any state intervention”.

At present, the current immigrant policy is under review, in view of (a) stabilizing the permanent resident status of documented migrants by reducing the risk of losing this status, (b) facilitating their transition to long-term regimes of increased rights and (c) enabling their full participation in the economic and social life, especially with regard to second generation immigrants. To this end, law 3838/2010 on “Current provisions for Greek citizenship and the political participation of foreign-born Greeks and of legally residing immigrants” has been recently introduced.

### *The knowledge of the Greek language*

In order to acquire the Greek citizenship and to be granted the status of long term resident, TCNs need to prove the knowledge of Greek language. In the first case (acquisition of citizenship), the adequate knowledge of the Greek language, history and culture can be certified following an interview of the interested party by the authorities. In the second case (acquisition of the status of long term resident) TCNs must, first of all, meet two criteria: they must be over 16 years of age and they must legally reside in the country.<sup>11</sup> If these criteria are met, they have to demonstrate a minimum working proficiency of the Greek language by passing the Level Two<sup>12</sup> (A2) exams.

Examinations are held twice a year (in February and in October). Before taking the exams, candidates need to attend courses of at least 150 hours on “Greek language” and 25 hours on “Greek history and culture”. The courses are also provided twice a year.

The Institute for Continuing Adult Education of the General Secretariat for Life Long Learning is responsible for the organization of the courses, while the exams are carried out by the Secretariat General for Life Learning /Centre for the Greek Language. Both authorities are supervised by the Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs. The cost of the exams procedure is covered by the state budget, while the Certificate of Greek language, history and culture

<sup>10</sup> Joint ministerial decree 25057/2008 (Ministries of: Interior Decentralization and e-Governance, Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs, Labour and Social Security, Health and Social Solidarity, Foreign Affairs, Economy, Justice, Development, Culture, Rural Development).

<sup>11</sup> 16928/2007 joint ministerial decree: Regarding the certification system of adequate knowledge of Greek language and adequate knowledge of Greek history and culture, for Third Country Nationals to acquire the status of long-term resident, in accordance with Presidential Decree 150/2006.

<sup>12</sup> There are four levels for the Greek Language Attainment: Levels A', B', C' and D', and four skills are examined: listening and reading comprehension, writing and oral. The examination addresses a target-group with general language needs and its content is of general interest, while its orientation is communicative. Level C, allows foreigners to register at a Greek institution of higher education, in case they do not have a Greek secondary education certificate (P.D. 138/9-7-99), while Level D allows EU member states citizens to prove complete knowledge and fluent use of the Greek language and thus be employed in the Greek civil service.

knowledge is being granted to the participants who have succeeded in their exams. After succeeding in the exams, immigrants can subsequently apply for the long term residence status. In case they fail, they can re-participate in the following exams, without any restriction. Only for the first time, candidates do not have to pay any fee for their participation.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly, the knowledge of the Greek language and the acquisition of basic skills are essential for some categories of foreigners, as without them, many immigrants find it difficult to enter the official labour market and as a result many remain at the margins of society long after they have moved into the country. Language courses financed through different EU funds have proved valuable in strengthening the effectiveness of the integration policy.

The Ministry of Interior, Decentralization & e-Governance, as the Competent Authority of the European Fund for the Integration of TCNs in Greece,<sup>14</sup> submits every year to the EU an Annual Programme with actions that promote the smooth integration of this target group (third country nationals legally residing in Greece) in the host society. These actions are co-funded by the EU (75%) and by national financing (25%).<sup>15</sup>

In the framework of the Operational Programme on 'Employment and vocational training' 2002-2006, the implementation of the "Greek language learning programs in certified centers of vocational training for unemployed immigrants – repatriated – refugees and unemployed from social vulnerable groups<sup>16</sup> for whom the inadequate knowledge of the Greek language inhibits their social inclusion" was part of a wider policy to support the social and economic integration of the immigrants. For example, after the successful completion of a language course, immigrants could apply for a traineeship, other lifelong learning opportunities, or for assistance in finding employment or setting up a business. The training course lasts 300 hours in accredited vocational training centers and aims at improving the linguistic and social skills of the participants. An important asset of the programme is the attainment of certification (2<sup>nd</sup> level) provided by the Center for the Greek Language of the Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs. During the first (2002-2005) and second (2005-2007) circles of the Greek language courses, a total of 11,564 persons participated, of which 8,819 were awarded the Certificate of Attainment in Greek. Currently, the programme is being implemented under the Operational Programme "Human Resource Development 2007-2013", and in the context of Thematic Priority Axis 4: 'Complete Integration of all Human Resources into a Society of Equal Opportunities' 8,888 persons are expected to participate.

Programs for socially vulnerable individuals are also being implemented, within the framework of the "EQUAL" Community Initiative. The Equal Community Initiative, co-funded by the EU (75%) and by national financing (25%), was implemented in two rounds (2001-2005 and 2005-2008) and proposed innovative interventions in the area of employment, in view of enhancing the right of all individuals, irrespective of sex, age, origin, cultural character, disability and beliefs- to participate in the labour market.

<sup>13</sup> European Migration Network, 2009, L3386/2005 provides for the attendance of third country nationals' children in primary and secondary education, regardless of their parents' residence status in the country.

<sup>14</sup> Law 3613/2007 and law 3649/2008.

<sup>15</sup> Amongst them are the programmes entitled "Education of immigrants in the Greek language, the Greek history and the Greek civilization" and "Teaching the Greek language as a second language for migrant workers".

<sup>16</sup> In the context of ESF, a large number of measures and actions target a broader group of people described by this term and includes migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, people with disabilities, drug-addicts, homeless, former prisoners and long term unemployed.

Finally, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, as the National Implementing Body for the “European Year of Equal Opportunities for All (2007)” and the competent body for the management and implementation of the Community Programme “PROGRESS”, upon consultation with the involved parties (Administrative authorities, local authorities, social partners, non-governmental organisations), draw up and carried out actions against -discrimination suffered on the grounds of race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation, with the aim of promoting the equal treatment of those suffering discrimination in the labour market and strengthening their relations with administrative bodies, social partners, local societies and civil society organisations.

Overall, it is worth pointing out that the projects and initiatives funded through EU Funds, have primarily focused on addressing the problems faced by different immigrants and minority groups in accessing mainstream employment and social support services and mechanisms.<sup>17</sup> Besides, ESF interventions related to Greek language courses, have contributed to developing basic/ key skills and career counselling services, thus increasing the employability of migrants and minorities and facilitating their integration in Greek society.

However, a commonly heard critique is that these interventions do not address some of the more significant problems faced by immigrants, such as the fact that their skills and experience are not being adequately recognised by Greek employers, thus preventing them from moving beyond low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Moreover, these initiatives are exclusively targeted at documented immigrants residing in the country, thus leaving out the large number of undocumented immigrants.

### 3. A brief assessment of the possible relevance of the policy to Greece

The Greek population is characterised by a low fertility rate (1.51 children/ woman in 2008, well below the replacement level) and an ever-increasing proportion of elderly persons, due to an increase in life expectancy.<sup>18</sup> As it was mentioned earlier, over the last twenty years Greece has become one of the main host countries of immigrant flows. As to the labour market developments, for years unemployment recorded high levels, affecting mostly women, young persons and other vulnerable groups. The risk of poverty has also remained steadily high. The global financial and economic crisis begun to have a deep impact on Greece in the early 2009 and since then the situation has been worsening dramatically.

In this context, there are indications that immigrants are among those worst affected by the economic recession (particularly TCNs). The impact is likely to be stronger for low skilled immigrants. Unemployment or wage reduction entails the risk of losing legal status, as documented migrants are unable to find adequate employment, thus running the risk of not

---

<sup>17</sup> Public social care for undocumented immigrants is limited to providing health services only in case of an emergency, whilst NGOs and migrant communities step in to fill some of the significant gaps in the provision of social and health care.

<sup>18</sup> In 2009, the percentage of aged persons 65 years accounted for 18.7% of the total population, while the ageing ratio was over 130%.

collecting the necessary number of social security contribution stamps. As a result, they are not able to claim the renewal of their work and residence permits.

Moreover, as labour migration in Greece is demand driven, due to the crisis the entry of new arrivals into the labour market is expected to be delayed. Employers will tend to be more selective at the hiring stage and characteristics such as language difficulties, may be used to screen out applicants.<sup>19</sup> Thus, taking into account the recent economic recession, perhaps the most important question to be addressed is how the stock of immigrants will cope with current conditions. Although ESF programmes could facilitate the access of immigrants and minorities in mainstream employment, education and social services, as this has been the case before the outbreak of the crisis, it is questionable whether such programmes and policy measures will be further pursued under the present economic crisis.

Nevertheless, some recent initiatives undertaken by the Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED) are considered to be in the right direction. These initiatives have taken the form of programmes to promote the recruitment of unemployed persons, including immigrants that legally reside in Greece. In particular, these programmes include the following:

- A special four-year program to promote employment, by subsidising the social security contributions for the recruitment of 40,000 unemployed persons.
- A special two-year program to promote employment, by subsidising the social security contributions for the recruitment of 25,000 unemployed persons.
- A special programme aimed at prolonging the tourist season, by subsidising the social security contributions for 50,000 seasonally employed persons working in the hotel industry, in order to enable the renewal of their contracts outside the peak season.

#### **4. Similarities and differences between Norway and Greece in the area of migration policies: a brief assessment**

Some similarities and differences between Norway and Greece regarding the immigrant population and immigration policy are worth being considered.

Unlike Norway, the Greek central administration system was, until recently, highly centralized. The prevailing status of relationships between the central Government, municipalities and local authorities, does not encourage cooperation, especially in areas such as the reception, integration and education of immigrants.

Regarding funding, a significant difference between the Greek Funds and the Norwegian Support Fund, is that the Greek model does provide for the co-financing of projects from the EU Funds (i.e. ESF and the European Integration Fund), while the actions undertaken by Norway are supported by the state budget alone.

Moreover, poverty in Greece is significantly greater than in Norway: 20.7% in Greece against 12.8% in Norway (see Table 1). Immigrants in Greece are among the most vulnerable groups, needing support and targeted 'active inclusion' measures.

---

<sup>19</sup> SOPEMI, 2009, p. 51.

**Table 1. Population and asylum statistics Greece and Norway.**

Country	Poverty rate, 2008	Population, 2010	Citizens of non EU countries, 2009	Population, born in non EU country	Asylum applicants 2009	Asylum applicants: First group, 2009	Asylum applicants: Total decisions, 2009	Asylum applicants: Positive decisions, 2009
Greece	20.7	11, 295,000	767,900	934,200	15,925	Pakistan	14,350	165
Norway	12.8	4,858, 000	137,600	812,300	17,140	Afghanistan	14,700	4,510

Source: Eurostat, 2101a. Eurostat, 2010b.

Finally, as Table 1 above illustrates, the total population of Greece is almost double the respective Norwegian one. The number of TCN immigrants born in non EU-countries is relatively high in both countries. However, as far as asylum applications and positive decisions are concerned, significant differences between the two countries can be observed. Greece has the lowest number of positive decisions (only 165 in 2009), while in Norway the number is significantly higher.

In general, it can be said that, Greece and Norway 'belong' to two distinctly different 'worlds', according to Esping Andersen's classification system of types of welfare states.

## 5. A brief discussion on the transferability of Norwegian policy in Greece

The three policy schemes implemented by the Norwegian authorities are of high relevance to Greece. These include the following: integration and cultural orientation courses soon after the arrival of immigrants and not only after an official status has been obtained (especially in regard to asylum seekers); integration of the newly arrived migrants in the education system; coordination of integration practices, and sharing practices at the local level.

Generally speaking, the immigrants' integration policy implemented in Norway turns out to be potentially useful for Greece, especially in the light of the implementation of the very recent reform regarding the decentralization of the Public Administration ('Kallikratis'). This reform ensures a higher degree of autonomy to the municipalities regarding social and educational policies. It should be pointed out, however, that from the perspective of the institutional transformation already launched, the transfer of significant financial resources from the central state to local administrations may prove to be quite difficult, if not outright impossible. In previous years, local authorities have suffered from mismanagement and financial deficiencies. Nevertheless, the impact of this institutional change will probably amplify the importance of local systems in providing social protection, in the reduction of poverty and in promoting better targeted active inclusion policies.

Besides the acquisition of language skills, other social inclusion aspects of the Norwegian policies are of great relevance to Greece, like, for example, the recognition of diplomas and vocational qualifications, access to decent housing and a decent level of consumption, measures against wage inequalities, etc. These issues are of crucial importance to the existing stock of immigrants who already reside in the country and who will also be affected by the new influx of immigrants.

Having said that, we are convinced that the Norwegian model could serve as a good example for Greece,<sup>20</sup> especially if national and local authorities have well defined roles and responsibilities in the area of immigrants' integration. The first scheme (introductory Programme) could be a good example for current and future interventions, for the present-day period as well as for the period when the financial crisis is over. Due to the crisis, however, it is difficult to provide all newly arrived immigrants with free access to language training and social studies, without support from the European Funds.

As far as the second scheme is concerned (the right and obligation to participate in language and social studies), we believe that it could be applied to all refugees,<sup>21</sup> given that Greece has a very low rate (the lowest in EU) of granting refugee status, as illustrated in Table 1 above.

Finally, the above mentioned Norwegian schemes could serve as pilot actions in selected local communities in Greece, with a middle level of immigrant concentration. It is questionable, however, given the present severe public deficit problems, whether municipalities will be able to provide high quality services.

---

<sup>20</sup> Through the "Kalikratis" plan, which is a reform of the public administration, many radical changes, such as the increased responsibilities of the local authorities, are introduced.

<sup>21</sup> Presidential Decree 668/18.5.2005 foresees free health care for asylum seekers and refugees who are not insured and thus cannot cover the related expenses. Free medical treatment includes free treatment in public hospitals and free access to medication from public hospitals. To ensure access to free health care, asylum seekers should hold the special asylum seekers card, and refugees should hold the special ID card for political refugees. The same applies (Presidential Decree 266/1999) for the foreign born whose stay in Greece has been permitted on humanitarian grounds and has not yet expired (Source: the Greek Council for Refugees).

The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare is implementing a series of support measures for refugees and asylum seekers, funded by the state budget and the European Refugee Fund, such as housing support, legal support, social support and health care. To meet the housing needs of unaccompanied minors, eight houses with a total capacity of 370 people have been provided. Until September 2009, 420 people had been hosted. There are also 7 apartments for asylum seekers' families, with a total capacity of 35 persons. In Lavrio, Ano Kallithea Spercheiados and Thessaloniki asylum seekers guest houses, 500 asylum seekers, families and adults are now hosted. Until September 2009, legal assistance, social support and interpretation has been provided to 2,274 individuals, and health care to another 1,200 individuals at various points of entry/ exit (Samos, Leros, Lesvos, Rodopi/ Evros, Patra) (Tsakoglou, Matsaganis, Mitrakos, 2009).

It should be noted that, in Greece asylum seekers are not allowed to work until they have received the required permission, which due to administrative procedures can take over a year. Asylum seekers mainly get short-term low profile jobs as most of them do not speak Greek and arrive without their diplomas and certificates of education and work experience.

A best practice policy was developed under the EQUAL programme. The project 'ESTIA' developed a highly sophisticated online database to "match" asylum seekers and refugees to services, training and employment opportunities. The database, called ESTIA, links a total of 40 operators in more than 22 contact points over the whole Attica-Thessaloniki-Crete axis. ESTIA acts as a one-stop-shop for asylum seekers and is an excellent coordination / communication tool for the associated organizations. The database approach of ESTIA has recently been included as a best practice in Greece's National Action Plan for Employment.

## References

Balourdos, D., 2009, The employment of skilled immigrants: can Greece adopt a more selective policy? Mutual learning programme, Peer Review on “Renewed procedures for employing migrant workers with the emphasis on favouring highly-qualified labour”, Estonia, 11th and 12th June 2009.

European Commission, 2010, First Annual Report on Immigration and Asylum, COM (2010) 214.

European Migration Network, 2009, Ad-Hoc Query on request on integration agreement and language examination for foreign citizens in the Member States.

[http://www.emn.fi/files/154/Response\\_Ad-Hoc from ITALY wider dissemination.pdf](http://www.emn.fi/files/154/Response_Ad-Hoc_from_ITALY_wider_dissemination.pdf).

Eurostat, 2010a, Asylum in the EU27. News Release, 2010, 64/2010 - 4 May 2010.

Eurostat, 2010b, Foreigners living in the EU are diverse and largely younger than the nationals of the EU Member States. Statistics in Focus, 45/2010.

International Migration Outlook: SOPEMI 2009. Publisher: OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

International Migration Outlook: SOPEMI 2010. Publisher: OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Karantinos, D., Manoudi A., 2010, Country Report 2, 2010, on employment, ethnicity and migrants. Network of socio-economic experts in the Anti-discrimination field VT-2008-007.

Ludovici, M.S., 2010, Making a success of integrating Immigrants in the labour market, Discussion paper. Peer review 18-19 November, Norway 2010.

Manpower Employment Organization, 2010, <http://www.oaed.gr>.

Ministry of Interior, Decentralization and e-Governance, 2009, <http://www.ypes.gr/en/>.

Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2009, The European Social Fund in Greece, 2000-2006.

Tsakoglou P., Matsaganis, M., Mitrakos T., 2009, Rational targeting and designed policies for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups (research report). General Secretariat for the Management of European Funds.