

IMMIGRATION:

Living in a Policy Vacuum

The plight of Albanian immigrants in Greece

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Greece has become a popular haven for Albanian emigrants in the last decade, many of whom cross the border illegally. This exodus has strained relations between the two countries, tensions that are further exacerbated by a lack of concrete immigration policies in either country, proper institutions and dialogue between the two states.

Greek-Albanian relations have been revived since the latter's Communist regime fell in 1991 and the country emerged from self-imposed isolation. An important element in these relations is the presence of a considerable Albanian immigrant population in Greece.

The rising wave of crime in Greece in recent years has been often attributed to Albanian immigrants and has been used as a pretext for retaliatory policies towards them. Negative stereotypes are constructed and regularly revived in the Greek media and by certain political personalities. The consequent xenophobic feelings fermented amongst the Greek population have then been used to justify government actions.

These hard line policies have served two aims. Firstly, they have covered up the lack of a coherent Greek immigration policy which would have prevented the rise in crime figures and the exploitation of immigrants through passport and visas falsification rackets, protection and the smuggling of people.

Secondly, they have served as a means of exerting pressure whenever tensions have arisen in interstate relations. The Greek government has often used the violent repatriation of Albanian illegal workers (the so-called "Broom" operations) as a means of putting pressure on Tirana. It has also occasionally limited the availability of visas and work permits for Albanians for the same reason. Similarly, concessions towards Albanian immigrants have been used to create a positive climate whenever it was convenient for better investment opportunities and for a better treatment of the ethnic Greeks in return. Albania, on her part, has often used "carrot concessions" towards Greek investors and businessmen, in order to secure the favourable treatment of Albanian immigrants by the Greek State.

Albanian migration

The transition from a centrally planned to market economy has been very hard for Albania. The shock therapy began in 1991. Hundreds of thousands were left unemployed as 90% of the factories were closed. The legacy of the inefficient economic model during the Communist regime, the economic crisis of the 1980s, the breakdown of the economic structures and the revolts of 1991 and 1997 were just a few of the many factors responsible for creating the economic plight during of the transition period.

Albanian migration became the solution to the enormous problems of satisfying even basic needs and was aided by the slackening of border controls that followed the anti-Communist uprisings at the end of 1990. There were about 400,000 Albanians working abroad in 1996, sending home about USD 500 million per year. This money was particularly important for the survival of the people remaining in Albania and for the development of the private sector.^[1]

The first great exodus of Albanian refugees crossed the borders with Greece and the sea to Italy during the crisis of 1991-92. At that time, the reasons for leaving the country were mainly political, as these people disliked the Communist regime and wished for change. At that time the Greek government decided to open the borders and issued a large number of visas, in order to let the members of the Greek minority reunite with their families over the border. Many of whom had been

separated for over 40 years. Many ethnic Albanians also crossed the border at this time. Since then, the reasons for emigrating have changed, now they are usually economic ones rather than political. Greek official policy has also changed.

The total number of immigrants, both legal and illegal, in Greece is thought to be between 400,000 and two million, an estimated 10% to 20% of the Greek work force.[2] The number of Albanian migrants who crossed into Greece between 1990 and 1994 has been estimated at 250,000.[3] Greece was usually their main destination and the natural choice for the majority of Albanian economic migrants in the period 1991-1999. Especially once the sea routes to Italy were blocked after stricter controls were introduced at ports on both sides of the Adriatic. On the other hand, the border between Greece and Albania is long and difficult to police and people are able to enter the country by walking across the mountainous frontier.

Official Greek reaction

The Greek State was not prepared to accept such an enormous influx of migrants. Besides, Greece had never experienced such a phenomenon before. In the period 1991-1998, there was no concrete migration policy, as the country was still considered to be a net "exporter" of population.[4] Specialist institutions, such as advice centres for the legal, social and economic orientation of immigrants (especially children), hardly existed. Furthermore, Albanians - and other - immigrants were excluded from aid by the social services, especially regarding the provision of housing, health care and personal safety, which is provided to Greek citizens by the state and Albanians found it difficult to satisfy certain needs, such as political, cultural and social expression, recreation and socialisation.[5]

The truth is that neither of the two governments involved had any proper policies for facing these needs or the results of rising criminal activity (as the result of either Greeks or others) connected with immigration until recently. As a consequence the distribution and sale of fake visas, passports and work permits has shown that there is a perfect collaboration between Greeks and non-Greeks in certain areas.

Significance for the Albanian economy

The importance of economic migration for Albania is paramount, because it is a kind of "development aid" through the export of labour force. Remittances are an indispensable financial source for the development of the Albanian private sector. Especially as other sources - domestic savings, export revenues, external borrowing, foreign investments, development aids, etc.- were insufficient during 1991-99. Moreover, the majority of Albanian families have been dependent on them for their survival. Remittances for 1991 have been estimated at USD 548.5 million and at USD 364 million for 1992. The majority of these payments came from Greece (82.2% in both years) and much of the rest from Italy (13.2%). In addition, technical knowledge and work experience, obtained by Albanian workers in Greece, were used to modernise production, as soon as immigrants returned to Albania.[6] Immigration had a political importance as well, as a key for releasing tensions that would have created anarchy and a further rise in crime, if all these unemployed people had stayed in the country.

Positive and negative consequences on the Greek economy

Theodoros Dizelos has given a comprehensive account of the consequences for the Greek economy of the employment of foreign workers in general, Albanian workers in particular. One of the positive consequences (for the economy, if not the workers) was that Albanians are employed with lower wages and often without social security. This leads to lower production costs and has a positive effect on the competitiveness of the Greek exports. Albanian workers exert a positive influence on Greek GNP, especially in the primary sector, where most of them are employed. They also contribute to the increase of the total consumer expenditure and to the income of certain categories of Greek citizens, such as owners of real estate. In other words, Albanian workers and their families help increase the private consumption of goods and services, although to a rather small extent, because their main aim is to save money through limited consumption.[7]

Moreover, undocumented workers form a readily available, flexible, occasional, disorganised labour force. Small Greek enterprises, facing bankruptcy and closure, have substantially benefited from these workers. Their economic survival has been secured by paying them very little or nothing - less than 2,000 drachma (USD 6) per day in 1994 -, avoiding social security costs, and by employing them only whenever they need them. The majority of Albanians are employed as unskilled workers in building sites, transportation, in middle-class houses and as transient agricultural workers. Very often they do jobs that Greeks do not want to do - hard, badly paid, temporary jobs, without standard working hours or social security.

Finally, it should be noted that Albanian children and teenagers, especially those between ten and seventeen years old, have fuelled the sex industry in Athens and the provinces.[8]

If the above constitute the "positive" consequences on the Greek economy (if not in moral terms), the negative consequences include an increase in unemployment in manual jobs, while unemployment in skilled work has not been affected. Moreover, in many cases, the low salaries paid to Albanian immigrants have pushed away Greek workers, especially in the industrial sector, in construction and in quarries. As a result there has been a general fall in pay in these sectors, and the position of the labouring class has become weaker, as a consequence of the abundance of alternative and cheaper employees.

We should also refer to the remittances sent by the immigrants to their families in Albania as a negative consequence, in the sense that part of the Greek GNP and foreign exchange is flowing out of the country. Finally, Greek public spending is increasing due to the immigrants. More precisely, the editing of visas and massive repatriations of illegal migrants is costing millions of US dollars to the Greek state. Moreover, there has been a loss of tax revenues, as the income of Albanian workers is often untaxed.[9]

Threats to Greek security

Greece's primary concern in relation to the Albanian question regards her external security. Especially since Albania has sought to develop strong ties with Turkey, Greece's traditional rival in the eastern Mediterranean. Concerned about a potential conflict with the Serbs, as well as the special relationship between Greece and Serbia, Sali Berisha, the Albanian President until 1997, promoted the strengthening of relations with Turkey, which has been very willing to co-operate. Greece has viewed this rapprochement with alarm, because she is afraid of the expansion of the Turkish influence in the Balkans, and the potential formation of an "Islamic Arc" (Albania - Bosnia - Turkey) which would run through her borders.

Nevertheless, it is worth focusing on the perceived threat to internal Greek security posed by Albanian migrants. Greece has been affected by the flourishing of organised crime (drugs and arms trafficking) in neighbouring Albania. Drug trafficking in particular has developed at an alarming rate in the last ten years across the entire region of Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans. Largely as a result of poverty, porous internal and external borders, the collapse of confidence in many of state institutions and civil strife.[10] In this unofficial economic sector, collaboration between Greeks and Albanians has been perfected, as an Albanian "middleman" reveals:

The Greek and Albanian mafias have already created the so-called "Brotherhood," which is responsible for all the mafia business. [...] we have divided Athens in cantons. The cantons are responsible for the trafficking, not the import, of drugs in different regions of Athens.[11]

If that was not enough of a problem, an estimated 700,000 firearms were stolen from army depots during the riots in 1997, and only some 100,000 had been returned by October 1998.[12] Many of these guns have been redistributed via the Greek illegal arms market and Greeks have even been reportedly approached in the street, and asked whether they wanted to buy a gun.

Furthermore, these population movements and the high demand for Greek visas has led to the development of rackets involving fake visas and passports and the illegal selling of stolen visas and

passports. In this field too, Greek-Albanian co-operation has become highly advanced. Greek officials in Albania and in the border customs have been illegally trading visas - fake or genuine - in co-operation with Albanian middlemen. In May 1993, the going rate for an illegal visa obtained through Greek officials in Tirana was roughly USD 300 to 350.[13]

Earlier this year, in two separate incidents, Albanians hijacked Greek buses. Actions that prompted the Greek Prime Minister, Kostas Simitis, to deal with the problem of criminality of foreigners and calm public opinion. The first of these incidents occurred on 29 May 1999, when an Albanian man brandishing a Kalashnikov and a hand grenade hijacked a Greek inter-city bus. The man took the passengers and the driver hostage and drove the bus to Albania, where he and a passenger were killed when the Albanian police stormed the bus[14] A month later another Albanian tried to hijack a bus but was thwarted by the Greek police.[15]

In the aftermath of these incidents, Simitis underlined the government's determination to combat crime and linked this issue with the intention to form a concrete policy on illegal immigration. Though he did stress that immigrants were not solely responsible for the recent rise in crime. Nevertheless, its timing and the linking of these two issues implied that they are closely connected in the minds of the Government.

Collaboration between the Greek-Albanian police only seriously started in summer 1999, after the hijackings. When the Chief of Greek Secret Police Pavlos Apostolidis and the Albanian Minister of Public Order Spartak Poci, met face to face to discuss these crimes, terrorism, criminal acts, interstate consequences and the mutual exchange of information.

Feelings among the Greek population

Greek feelings towards the Albanian immigrants are overwhelming negative. Of all the migrants in Greece, Bulgarians, Romanians, Poles, Kurds, Africans, Pakistanis, etc, the Albanians are the least appreciated. The sad truth is that racism and fear against the "Balkan other," personified by the economically devastated and desperate Albanian immigrant, is an everyday reality for the Greek population. Even for people who before 1991 were not dominated by racist and xenophobic feelings. These Greek insecurities cover a wide spectrum, from fears that Albanians might break into houses, stealing and killing, to threats against the cultural and blood "purity" of the Greek population, and fears for the potential formation of a minority of ethnic Albanians in Greece.

In the collective social consciousness crime is closely connected with immigrants, particularly those from Albania. Researchers agree that the percentage of crime for which the Albanians are responsible, compared to the rest of the immigrant population in Greece, was only 4.5%, and was thus directly proportional to their numbers and, therefore, not exceptionally high. It is true that the desperate economic situation, unemployment and the life in ghettos inside the Greek cities, are factors that breed crime and segregation among the immigrant population.

There are two myths in relation to this question that need to be dispelled. Firstly, that Albanians are not only culprits, but also victims of criminal activity, because their presence itself has created numerous opportunities for illegal activities (such as prostitution and "protection," trafficking of illegal immigrants, illegal trade or falsification of visas, passports). Secondly, these activities have been conducted by both Albanians and Greeks, and often by the Greek authorities themselves. Nevertheless, immigrants are usually the ones identified as culpable by the police.

Additionally, the hysteria directed against Albanian immigrants has been created and continually revived by the Greek media. Quite often Greek television channels and newspapers have assumed that burglars and thieves were Albanians, without actually having any proof, since the individuals concerned had not been arrested. There have even been cases when Greek citizens have injured or killed Albanians on the spot for stealing and have escaped the legal consequences, feeling justified in taking the law into their own hands and encouraging others to imitate them. Moreover, Albanians have reportedly been beaten up because of their nationality and even Greeks have been attacked for looking like Albanians. Nevertheless, no major racist activist organisations exist in Greece, such as those, which exist in Germany and France. Finally, criminal stereotypes against the Albanians have

been used by certain Greek politicians for party or personal political interests, and the Greek police force has often supported the theory that the rise in crime is due to illegal migration, to cover its lack of preventive policy.[16]

Greek pressure on Tirana

Using tried and tested "carrot and stick" methods these Albanian immigrants have often been used by the Greek State as a means of pressurising Albania, during the period 1991-1999. Not least by the granting of additional visas and work permits to Albanian immigrants. Greek pressure has been successful because Greece is particularly important for the Albanian economy - and her security - by being a host for Albanian workers.

Among the "stick" measures used by Greece are massive deportations of mainly - but not exclusively - illegal immigrants, promises for the legalisation of illegal Albanian workers. The usual practice during these operations is that the police storm certain areas where Albanians work and hang around, arrest them and later transport them to the Greek-Albanian border where they are let free. Such procedures are referred to under the heading of "Operation Broom." Often workers with the all the correct documents are arrested as well and documents and passports, which are suspected - but not always confirmed - to be fake are torn up by the police officers. Moreover, Albanian immigrants do not have the time to collect their personal belongings and savings before being expelled. Massive deportations of Albanian workers were carried out in December 1991, June 1993, Autumn 1994, August 1996 and July 1999 and have usually caused tension or a further deterioration in Greek-Albanian relations. We will mainly focus on three cases where the reasons for carrying out these operations were obviously to put pressure on Albania regarding bilateral issues.

On the 25 June 1993, the "Archimandrite Crisis" erupted. Chrysostomos Maidonis, a priest that Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos of the Albanian Orthodox Church had invited to preach in Gjirokaster, was expelled from Albania, because he was accused of stirring up the Greek minority and supporting the annexation of Southern Albania to Greece. Soon after the Greek Prime Minister Constantinos Mitsotakis started massive deportations of illegal Albanian immigrants as a retaliatory measure. Consequently Albanian President Sali Berisha complained to the UN. The situation deteriorated further when demonstrations were held outside the Albanian embassy in Athens, Albania recalled her ambassador and cancelled three official visits by the Greek Foreign, Defence and Finance Ministers. The pressure's main aim concerned the situation of the Greek minority and the ability of the Greek government to influence the internal affairs of Albania.

In April 1994, an attack on a military post near Gjirokaster and deaths of two Albanian soldiers - allegedly by Greek military - became the reason of a massive repatriation of Albanian immigrants working in Greece later the same year. MAVI, a Greek terrorist group dedicated to changing the Greek-Albanian border through provocative actions later claimed responsibility for the attack.[17] Tirana and Athens expelled diplomats and five leaders of Political, Social and Cultural Association of the Greek National Minority in Albania (OMONOIA) who were considered to have been involved in the incident were arrested.[18] In August of the same year, "The Five" were tried and convicted of espionage and illegal arms possession.

This resulted in the expulsion of more than 100,000 Albanians from Greece in Autumn 1994 and the suspension of USD 43 million of EU macroeconomic aid to Albania until November 1994. Finally, in February 1995, Albania's Supreme Court decided to release the four remaining ethnic Greek leaders of OMONOIA on probation and Greek-Albanian relations improved.

In the most recent case, in July 1999, the police launched a sweep operation in the northern Greek town of Florina near the Greek-Albanian border during the second hijack of a Greek inter-city bus (see above). The police claimed the operation was a precautionary measure in case the hijacker had accomplices in Florina, following his insistence that the bus passed through the town.[19] Nevertheless, the repatriation of the Albanian immigrant population of Florina seems a disproportionately harsh measure in relation to the allegation of the existence of accomplices. Serious doubts arose about whether that was the real reason or simply a pretext to get rid of the

immigrants and satisfy outraged public opinion. The deportations could have also been used to demonstrate to Tirana that Greece is willing to use hard policy measures unless they take positive action to stop the criminal activity of their citizens on Greek territory.

Consequences on Greek-Albanian relations

Albanian immigrants in Greece have undoubtedly often been involved in criminal activity. Nevertheless, the media and sometimes politicians have exaggerated these incidents in order to create stereotypes suggesting that immigrants are mainly responsible for crime and unemployment in Greece. Such stereotypes have prepared the ground in the Greek collective social conscience to justify the unfair and cruel treatment of economic migrants by the police and the state. The "Broom" operations and harsh police measures appealed to the public and served a double aim. Apart from putting pressure on the Albanian government, they filled the gap created by the lack of a concrete policy about migration and criminality that would have stopped illegal migration and would have solved problems of corruption connected with falsification of visas and other criminal activities. Retaliatory measures against the Albanian immigrants were accepted and morally justified by the majority of the Greek population since, "all Albanians are criminals" and "it was high time the country was purged."

Such policies have continuously caused friction in Greek-Albanian relations. Albanian governments have already complained to international organisations, and Greece's record on human rights has been seriously harmed. Besides, Greece is still considered an enemy in the Albanian collective conscience, as Hoxha, the former Communist dictator, had cultivated the idea that the country is surrounded by hostile powers ready to dismember her.

Consequently, in the period 1990-99 Greece has not managed to dispel the traditional suspicion of the Albanian population or to portray herself as a regional superpower friendly to Albania.

Stereotypes of criminality, underdevelopment and vulgarity about Albanians have harmed Greek-Albanian relations in another way. A general impression has been formed among the Greek population that the Albanian population, as a whole, is worthless, corrupted and mischievous, and thus should not be trusted or even helped. It is increasingly difficult for the Greek government to persuade the people that Albania is friendly when such ideas flourish.

As far as Albania is concerned, there has been no attempt to hold back the increasing number of immigrants coming illegally, nor any bilateral co-operation on this issue and the continuing rise in crime. Recently attempts have been made to resolve the common problems caused by the Albanian immigrants and the Greek minority by increasing dialogue between the two countries which in itself is a good thing and will hopefully bring the two countries closer. However, there have been frequent differences of opinion, and adequate solutions have yet to be found.

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Endnotes

1. M Sullivan, "Albania Rides the Wave of Capitalism," *Transition*, Vol 2, No 20, 4 October 1996, pp 15-17.
2. Theodoros Dizelos, "Ta Syn kai ta Plin Gia tin Oikonomia" (The Pluses and the Minuses for the Economy) in *Afieroma: Prosfyges kai Metanastes: 100 Ekatommyria Thymata Ftohias-Polemou ston Planiti, Eleftherotypia* (Special Issue: Refugees-Immigrants: 100 Million Victims of Poverty-War in the Planet), 12 June 1999, p 20.
3. Robert Goro, "Minorities Over the Border," *War Report*, No 25, March/April 1994, p 15.
4. Chr Megas, "Horis Hartia Ekeinoi Horis Thesmous Emeis" (Them Without Papers, We Without Institutions) in *Afieroma, Eleftherotypia*, 12 June 1999, p 7.
5. Iordanis Psimmenos, *Metanastefsi Apo ta Valkania: Koinonikos Apokleismos stin Athina* (Immigration from the Balkans: Social Segregation in Athens), Glory Book - Papazisis, Athens, 1995, pp 113-195.
6. A.Kontis, "I Oikonomia tis Alvanias kai i Elliniki Meionotita" (The Albanian Economy and the

Greek Minority) in *O Ellinismos tis Alvanias* (The Ethnic Greeks of Albania), edited by Th Veremis, Th Kouloubis and I Nikolakopoulos, University of Athens-ELIAMEP, I Sideris, Athens, 1995, pp 135-138.

7. Th Dizelos, "Ta Syn kai ta Plin," p 20.

8. I Psimmenos, *Metanastefsi apo ta Valkania*, pp 158-195.

9. Th Dizelos, "Ta Syn kai ta Plin," pp 20-21.

10. Lowell A Bezanis, "An Enlarged Golden Crescent," *Transition*, Vol 2, No 19, 20 September 1996, pp 6-11.

11. I Psimenos, *Metanastefsi apo ta Valkania*, p 165.

12. Andi Bejtja, "Albania Spins Out of Control," *Transitions*, Vol 5, No 10, October 1998, pp 44-46.

13. Hall Derek, *Albania and the Albanians*, Pinter Reference, London, 1994, p 191.

14. "Greece Begins Investigation Into Albanian Hijacker Case," Athens News Agency WWW, 3 June 1999.

15. "Further on Greek Hostage Incident," Athens News Agency, 19 July 1999.

16. For more information about how and why were these stereotypes created and supported by various Greek circles, see Vasilis Karydis, *I Eglimatikotita ton Metanaston stin Ellada: Zitimata Theorias kai Anteglimatikis Politikis* (The Criminal Activity of Immigrants in Greece: Issues of Theory and Anti-criminal Policy), Papazisis, Athens, 1996.

17. The group claimed responsibility for the car bombing of the Albanian ambassador to Athens in 1991 and for a raid on an Albanian military outpost in April 1994, before it was dismantled by the Greek security forces in 1995.

18. The first political party coming exclusively from the ethnic Greek community, after the legalisation of the political parties in Decemebr 1990. It was established in February 1991 and participated in the parliamentary elections of 31 March of the same year, winning five seas in the parliament before it was banned by law No. 7502/91 from the parliamentary elections of 1992 as a party based on ethnic criteria.

19. "More on Bus Hijacking by Albanian in Thessaloniki," Athens News Agency WWW, 15 July 1999.