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IMMIGRANTS: A STUDY CASE FOR N. GREECE

Maria Vlachadi

Corresponding Author: University of Crete, Greece. Email: mvlahadi@yahoo.gr

Arhontia Telaki

University of Crete, Greece. Email: arxodia@hotmail.com

Abstract

It is a fact that the phenomenon of immigration constitutes, during the last years, the view of a new social and economic reality for the societies of most western European countries. Greece has received for the first time, during the 1990s, thousands of economic immigrants who appear not only in the big city centers but also in small country towns. Immigrants probably constitute the most discussed issue in the Modern Greek society, in an economic conjuncture in which the economic crisis has functioned in a catalytic way for the diffusion of insecurity in the native population (Biblionet, 2012). The Greek state was not ready to accept such a large number of immigrants in so little time. It showed hesitance and could not keep a steady position as far as the promotion of a necessary institutional framework for their integration in the Greek society was concerned. This initial surprise has never been overcome. In Greece, as well as in the rest of the European South, the majority of the immigrants entering the country illegally have supplied the informal working market. Even when they become legal, the available working positions for them presuppose low specialization with low payments, hard work and limited opportunities of improvement of their social and occupational status. Although the immigration phenomenon is usually approached in a national level, the local level is considered the most suitable one to deal with the interaction of its economic, social, political and cultural dimensions. Recent studies have shown their positive contribution in the revival of Greek agriculture and Greek agricultural districts in general. Within the scale of the Greek community and the degree in which it constitutes a place of constant flow of human resources, it is inevitable the general presence of immigrants to raise issues of mutual infiltrations among different national populations within which there arise interaction issues and intercultural interdependence of the immigrants themselves with the local population creating conditions of a potential multicultural society (The Greek Review of Social Research, 2008).

Keywords: Immigrants, Work, Social Welfare, Social Problems, Repatriation

1. Introduction - Methodology

In the specific project using as examples the prefectures of Imathia and Pieria, it is attempted to show the employment conditions of immigrants in the agricultural sector, any social or economic problems they face as well as their aspects on issues concerning the total of these residents. The research was conducted during the period March-April 2013 through personal semi-structured interviews with immigrants occupied in the agricultural activities of the area, while for the selection of the sample, the method of the snowball was used. The total sample consists of 10 people 4 of whom are men and 6 of whom are women, while their ages range between 18-

45 years old. The main focus of the research lies in the quality of the living conditions of the interviewees themselves as well as their families, the examination of the exploitation relations with their employers and the social welfare provided.

2. Demographical Data

According to the census of 2001, 762.191 people live in the country without having the Greek nationality and constitute 7% of its total population. The analogy of the two sexes within the various nationalities of the immigrants is not standard. There is a relative balance in the analogy of the two sexes; however, in certain nationalities there are great variations. More specifically the Asian countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh and India) have totally male population. Albania and Romania have a male population in a percentage of 60%. The other significant numerous nationalities (Bulgaria, Georgia, USA, Cyprus, Russia, United Kingdom, Germany, Poland) have a female population in a percentage which comes to 50-60% of the total population. Around an 80% of the immigrants are in a working age (15-64), a percentage which comes in contrast with the 68% of the Greek population. The significant difference with the Greek population is the presence of more Greek elderly people. The largest concentration of foreigners from third countries (outside of the E.U.) is observed in the Municipality of Athens with 132.000 immigrants who constitute the 17% of the total population while Salonika follows with 27.000 foreigners. Based on the data of the first legalizing program, - *carte blanche* – we can see that the foreigners who are in Greece come from 120 countries. The majority though, 91% comes from 10 countries (Chart 1). The immigrants from the rest of the countries do not get over 1% per nationality (First Steps to De, It, GR, n.d.).

The largest national population in immigrants is the Albanian in a percentage of 65%. The Bulgarian is second in a percentage of 6, 8% and third is the Romanian 4, 6%. The Balkans is the region which mainly supplies immigration in Greece. The countries of the former Soviet Union follow which come to a 7%. From these countries Ukraine (5th in line) with 2, 6% stands out along with Georgia (7th) with 2% (First Steps to De, It, GR, n.d.). In our sample case of our research, we can observe that 70% of the total interviewees come from Albania, 20% from Bulgaria while only 10% come from Georgia. In relation to their family status, 60% are married with 1-2 children while the rest 40% stated single. In reference to the reasons of their immigration to our country, they stated that they were basically economic, searching for a better life which they could not have in their country. “A month before I leave, my father and mother were killed in a car accident and I was left alone with my brother who was 16 years old at the time. There was no work there for him or me” Mara told us, 35 years old from Bulgaria.

Educational level of the interviewees is presented in Table 1 (it results from the interviews).

Table 1. Educational level of the interviewees

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	% IMMIGRANTS PER EDUCATIONAL LEVEL
ILLITERATES	10%
PRIMARY	30%
SECONDARY	50%
TERTIARY	10%
TOTAL	100%

3. Incorporation in the Working Market

Studying a “new model of social reproduction which first appeared in the mid-1970s was established in the 1980s and showed its first signs of crisis in the 1990s”, Vaiou and Chatzimihalis are looking into the position of immigrants in a working market which is based on low working cost and “flexibility” (Vaiou and Chatzimihalis, 1997, p.13). Within this context, they are looking into the “informal” working market in a local level and not specifically the position of

foreigners in the working market. The reference concerns the immigrants in the regions of Imathia and Pella and the contribution of foreign workers in the restructuring of the agricultural production. The writers point out that the country had already been since the mid-1980s “a privileged place of “concealed” foreign informal labor”. They locate in the prefectures of Imathia and Pella increased demands for foreign labor for a trimester, as long as the harvest lasts, the selection and the export of peaches. So, “cheaper” Albanians were hired who had a lower educational level, were younger men of age, came mainly from rural areas and had no visa. Another difference between Polish and Albanian workers was the prolonged stay of the latter during the rest months of the year. The writers point out that “the work done by the illegal working Polish and Albanians did not substitute the work of the locals, but was carried out in 34% in sectors where if foreign workers had not done it nobody would have”. The above aspect is confirmed by Elton, 18 years old, student in technical Lyceum and worker during the summer months in the peach harvest, country of origin Albania: “My job during the harvest is to put the peaches in boxes for the selection to be made. All summer, from 10-15 June when school stops I start work and I finish in the beginning of September.”

4. Nature of Labor

The total of the interviewees sample is occupied in agricultural farming of products produced in the prefectures of Imathia and Pieria like cotton, tobacco, beetroots and peaches. What follows is a small description of the nature of labor of some people asked: “Basically we begin with cotton. We get the fields ready. As they have already been ploughed since winter, in March we prepare them for the sowing of the new harvest. In April we arrange the lines-the harrows so that we know where to step into the field, we arrange the pipes we clean the grass. Until the end of September when we gather everything back from the field there are plenty of things to do. We begin the sowing from mid-April until the end of May. It always depends on the state of the field because if it is muddy you cannot sow it. There are two kinds of fields the heavy ones; they are also called “sertika” in Greek and the sandy ones. In the sandy ones we begin earlier because the field itself allows it. In the sertika we wait until the weather gets warmer because the seed will not grow if the field is muddy.” (Jimmy, 33 years old, Albania) “The tobacco is planted in greenhouses so when the seed is ready and grown in size of a small lettuce it is transferred and sown into the fields. These have been fertilized and when they start growing a little they are put in special cases so they can grow correctly. When they grow we water them and wait for them to get ready and have some color. There are two kinds of tobacco, the Virginia which are big and the small ones. For the cigarettes the small ones are used which are better. The tobacco is gathered from June until September. The tobacco is gathered in hands, we begin from the leaves which are closer to the ground and then we proceed to the ones on top. If you see fields with tobacco around August the stems below are naked from leaves and only the top has leaves. Afterwards they take them to storages piled in strings where they leave them to dry and then carry them in sacks to the factories to make the selection.” (Mara, 35 years old, Bulgaria) 9 out of 10 interviewees stated satisfied by their payment in relation to the hours and their hard work. The wages range between 25-30€ for an 8 hour day’s work, 6 days a week, with the exception of the summer months when they have to work all days of the week when the farming requires it. The basic disadvantage in their work as far as the immigrant workers of our sample are concerned is the lack of social security by their employer. Only 2 out of 10 live legally in the country and can have social security, while the rest are usually charged for the medical care they receive. As far as the issue of exploitation is concerned, the majority stated satisfied enough from the employer’s attitude with the exception of some references to incidents with no direct involvement.

-Have you changed many employers?

-Look, there was an incident in Giannitsa before I leave. I don’t know if you have heard about it, you must have been quite young at the time. The employer I was working for was exploiting people and he was looking for hungry people so that he can exploit them. He gave them a warehouse to sleep in and 500 just to say that he paid them but when the incident with the betrayal happened we all left. We left on our own; he did not throw us out.

-Would you like to talk to me about it?

-In one of the warehouses there stayed 4 guys from Albania, illegally without papers. He had them working in his field he gave them next to nothing so that he can say that he paid them. One night he called the police and told them that there were some people staying in his warehouse and he had no idea who they were. He owed them wages of a month! Do you understand what I'm saying here? They had been working for him for a month, they were asking him all the time about their money and he kept telling them that he was waiting for some money from subsidies or something so that he can pay them. The guys kept waiting but nothing happened. Until one night the police came and took them and sent them back to Albania.

5. The Attitude of Greeks towards the Immigrants

The research conducted during the last fifteen years concerning the attitude of Greeks towards the immigrants often focuses on the issue of racism and xenophobia according to the established model of the relevant research of the Euro barometer. Since the late 1990s, the European Union in its research deals with this issue in a different way, as it incorporates this attitude towards foreigners within the context of social exclusion, which appears to be less painful. Michalopoulou along with her associates, in a research focusing on the region of Macedonia, have found out that the presence of foreigners does not constitute "an especially significant problem" as far as the majority of the public opinion is concerned although it is considered rather intense. More specifically, the sample is characterized by attitudes of tolerance except for a small part which shows intense prejudice and xenophobia. However, "foreigners are considered guilty of a series of issues which are made as such by the current prevalent reason about foreigners (...): the increase in unemployment and the deterioration of the economic situation of the country". (Stratoudakis, 2008, p.56) Finally, the people in the sample support the legalization of immigrants and the provision of rights. While though the presence of foreigners does not concern them, the arrival of more immigrants is estimated to have two different repercussions: it increases unemployment and at the same time it contributes to the preservation of occupations that are in danger of extinction. Although the research in key information seems to confirm generally the attitudes of the wider public, there is a variation recorded though concerning the degree they adopt the trafficking control the duration of their stay and a limit in the legalization of the presence of immigrants. What is the opinion of the immigrants themselves talking about it?

-What some people say about the increased criminality in Greece because of the immigrants, what is your opinion?

-Yes, I believe it too. Let me tell you something, I as an Albanian have lived in hell since 1997. When the prisons opened and robbers, rapists and murders came to Greece we were considered all criminals. Fortunately afterwards with papers and documents they arrested people and things started becoming clearer because half of them went to Italy and others who did not have any connections came here. (Mario, 28, Albania).

-Do you believe there were incidents from immigrants?

-Look, for me an immigrant and a Greek, and it is hard to say it, are very much alike in character. The man who wants to harm somebody does not stand out because it says in his identity that he is from there. My child is half from Greece and half from Bulgaria, so what? Is it half good and half bad? I cannot distinguish whose fault it is more. (Tassia, 41, Bulgaria)

6. Working Environment

As the interviewees stated agriculture is not an easy task, however they consider that all necessary rules are followed concerning their protection and did not face a serious health problem because of their workload.

(Bekas, 22 years old, Georgia)

-Are there dangers concerning your health in this job?

-Yes, but we are careful.

-Fertilizers, pesticides?

-Yes, yes, we wear gloves, masks. We are careful and do what the agronomist tells us to do. How to do it; the dosage needed.

-Have you ever had any problems with your back? Dizziness? Dyspnea?

-No, no.

(Katia, 30 years old, Albania)

-Are there dangers for your health in this job?

-There are dangers everywhere and working in a field is not an easy task. I want this job that is why I do it. This is how I earn my living and as long as there is work for me I will keep doing it.

-Have you ever had any problems with your back? Dizziness? Dyspnea?

-No, I had dizziness only during my pregnancy and my back hurts when I spend hours bending picking, but I have never had such strong backache so that I cannot move.

(Elda, 42 years old, Albania)

-How are the working conditions? The sprayings?

-Look, during sprayings we wear protective uniforms and our boss tells us when there is going to be one so that we can be prepared. Do you understand?

-Yes, yes. Have you ever had any problems with your back? Dizziness? Dyspnea? Anything else...?

-No, I have never had any problems, my back aches sometimes after hard work, but that's all.

(Elton, 18 years old, Albania)

-Is the work tiring?

-The hard part is that you work under the sun in the heat because it is a job that has to be done only in summer but you get used to it. In the beginning when I worked in the peaches I could not stand wearing a T-shirt in such heat but you cannot do it any other way because peaches have a lot of down and you get itchy all over.

7. State Welfare

Bearing in mind that in the late 1990s, when the legalizing programs were introduced, there was a sudden and radical shift of the weight concerning the confronting and the control of immigrants from the police to public services, which became authorized for the stay and their employment in Greece, Psimmenos and Kassimati started researching these public services. Special emphasis is given to IKA and OAED (Psimmenos, 1995, p.213) and the object of their research consists of "the organizational culture and the working values of the employees" as determining factors between the state mechanism and the immigrants. To the question "how and what is implemented on a daily basis as far as the immigrants are concerned?" the answer is that the official immigration policy leaves enough flexibility margins and personal interpretation forms the roles and the possibilities. These margins are summarized by the researchers as follows:

-Public services confront immigrants differently and the employees working in various departments follow the same philosophy but with different approaches

-a prevailing issue in the implementation of immigration policy is the presence of informal and at times distinct practices which separate immigrants from the native population

-The aspects of the employees concerning the social integration of immigrants and the provision of services are defined on how they see the relation of the organization with the Greek economy and society

-the boundaries of tolerance of the employees range between cultural stereotypes, distinctive practices concerning the relation of bureaucracy and operation of the organizations in Greece and values and fears concerning the modernization of public administration and economy.

Therefore, the confrontation of immigrants is affected by the way the employees see their professional relation within the Organization they work for. From their side immigrants do

not realize the flexibility and the discriminations as a result of the various factors the research showed, but as state policy, up to a point they realize that “the services and their employees do not really want to be of service to these immigrants as they should but they confront them as “others”, as “different”, as “dangerous”. They exhaust negatively their boundaries of tolerance during the exercise of their administrative duties projecting themselves as guardians of our country and religion” (Kasimis, 2004, p.189-190).

In our study case as it has been mentioned before only 2 out of 10 immigrants have officially social security so they can be provided with “free” medical care. However, these same people refer to their confrontation in public services when they had to go there because of health problems, they did not have the feeling that they were being treated as minorities or not equally comparing to the rest of the patients.

8. Social Problems

What follows are certain aspects of interviewees concerning social problems these people seem to face in their areas of residence:

-What do you think of the economic conditions of the people here?

-Nobody is OK, who is? Winter is coming and you can see smoke coming out of the stove pipes. Nobody talks about oil. They come every morning to the bakery and get a loaf of bread with difficulty. Do you know how it is to find it difficult to buy a loaf of bread? I know, its taste is bitter if you have to count your coins to buy it. It is as if a bomb fell on the country and everything goes backwards instead of forward. What can I say...? I wish things would change because people suffer. (Elda, 42 years old, Albania)

-What is your opinion about drugs?

-I think it's stupid. I don't understand why I have to pay to feel good, like some people say. I'll go out with my friends I'll have a drink, a beer I'll dance and I'll have a good time. Taking drugs so that I get dizzy and start laughing and doing foolish things and embarrass myself? I don't understand it, no. There are many people doing it, I don't want to put the blame on anybody but even kids at school find the right people and buy them. You don't get smart just because you're doing something forbidden by the law. They only harm themselves and they don't understand it but it's not only their fault, if you ask me. They are stupid kids, they don't think for themselves, taking money from their dad and doing something others don't, makes them feel superior. Why would you give somebody 50€ for a Saturday night out? Do what? He'll eat something and drink something, half of it is OK. The other half goes to drugs. I work and I get 30€ for a day's work and the other one gets 50€ for a night out. It's stupid from parents and kids alike. (Elton, 18 years old, Albania)

-What about the city? The roads, the sewage system, the buildings...?

-I like them. There are places you can really enjoy spending some time. I haven't been to another country but I like Greece. The only thing I don't like is the old buildings which they don't restore. They start falling down and it's then when they do it. About the roads, the toll posts? OK, they built roads. But you can't be paying so much money for gas to go to Salonika from Agrinio where I live and having also to pay tolls. (Mara, 35 years old, Bulgaria)

-And criminality?

-Look, the biggest problem in Alexandria is the slum. All the gypsies living in the slum within the city, nobody dares go there, even the police are afraid to go there. If you pass by the train station in the morning you'll see them waiting to get on the first train to Salonika for work. Do you know what work? Steal a purse, a wallet, send the kids begging in the streets and in the evening you can see all of them driving around in a Mercedes. I'm not a racist, I can't be one. I've got Albanian blood too. But you can't go after the Albanian kid in the street and let all these people do what they want. In Veria Golden Dawn beat up a kid from Albania coming from school. Is this democracy? Or are gypsies considered Greeks? We are all human, if you are a criminal you don't stand out because of the color of your skin. (Mario, 28 years old, Albania)

In reference to all the above when these people were asked to make a suggestion, give an idea for the solution of the above problems they answered:

“Our voice isn’t heard, we don’t vote. Why should they listen to us? Let me tell you something, they don’t even listen to the Greeks, they don’t listen to anybody. People go out protesting and nobody pays attention. OK, now they’ve lost control...” (Mara, 35 years old, Bulgaria)

“I believe that each one protests for his own interest. Haven’t you heard when they say, the neighbor’s goat died and they answer, what do you care? Was it yours? This is how it goes and they have lost control. If you don’t care about your neighbor today, he won’t care about you tomorrow.” (Elda, 42 years old, Albania)

“Who will give a solution? What solution? Mayors and Members of Parliament... not a chance my girl... Your death is my life!” (Tassia, 41 years old, Bulgaria)

“I’m young, when I finish school I’m out of here. You know what? All these years the Greeks are proud of their humanity and good will. Now that you have to pay even if you have to go to a Health Center we’ll see where their humanity will go. We will end up like in America where you die like a dog in the street if you don’t have insurance and money and nobody takes you in.” (Elton, 18 years old, Albania)

“We should all go out in the streets, all together, we are more. We are with you; we’re going through what you’re going through. Do you think I’m happy when I see my boss having a hard time? But it is what it is; everybody goes out and then comes back inside...” (Mario, 28 years old, Albania)

“I don’t care... we’ll be OK we’ll go with the flow. We’ll find something to eat anywhere. If you’re not afraid of hard work, you’re not afraid of anything.” (Jimmy, 33 years old, Albania)

9. Case of Repatriation

To the question if there is a contingency of repatriation or immigration to another country, only 1 out of 10 answered affirmative:

-To Italy for a better life, it’s better there than it is here. I’ve got a cousin working in a pizza place and he told me when I finish school to go there. The wages aren’t much more, they are more or less the same but it’s one thing serving pizzas or coffees and another working in the fields. (Elton, 18 years old, Albania)

The rest of them answered negatively:

-My family and friends are here, I grew up here. I’m talking with my friends sometimes what we’ll do if there is a war. I can’t shoot a Greek, I’ll surrender. I didn’t stay in Albania long, I didn’t see anything. I don’t think about it much because I was born there but all my friends are here so I don’t want to leave. One more thing about the kids growing up here is that they make new friends. Why go back to Albania? As long as grandma and grandpa are there we’ll be visiting and then come back. (Mario, 28 years old, Albania)

-Basically no, as long as I’ve got work here in Greece. Of course need makes you do a lot. If I don’t have a job and I’ve got the right documents, I might. If you get hungry, what can you do? Wherever there is work you survive. Poverty is a very bad thing... maybe because I’ve been poor and I know how it is I don’t want anyone to go through this. Poverty brings nagging and you can’t enjoy anything (Bekas, 22 years old, Georgia)

-Look, to tell you the truth life in Bulgaria is so cheap now, they move factories from here to there and things get better. They even send their kids to study there. I don’t think about it, I’ve got a family, a kid. Later, I don’t know. We’ll go with the flow. (Tassia, 41 years old, Bulgaria)

10. Conclusions

In our attempt to decode the concept of immigration in the two prefectures of Imathia and Pieria, we faced the hesitation of these specific people to express themselves. The problem does not lie obviously in the difficulty of communication because of lack of knowledge of the Greek language, but in other parameters like the fear of the illegal and not insured immigrants which made them in the beginning hesitant in their answers. Afterwards, a different dimension was given on the whole matter as the atmosphere became friendly and the interviews took the form of a discussion. Some of them stated that "their opinion does not count" this is why nobody up to now happened to ask them about their working issues and their everyday life. As far as work is concerned, we conclude that in total they are relatively satisfied with the payment and the nature of work, with their only reference to the issue of the insurance which was not provided. However, about their medical care they did not express any complaints about their confrontation or special treatment by state officials, doctors, nurses etc. On the other hand, as far as their living conditions are concerned our sample belongs to the privileged ones who only live with members of their family in accommodation which cover the proper conditions of hygiene and enjoy entertaining facilities like the television. About the heating which is a major issue for everybody nowadays, the total of the interviewees stated that they cover the matter of heating in their houses with "autonomous" heating using wood stoves or gas stoves. Finally, according to the social issues the interviewees referred to and the suggestions these people were called to make is obvious that during an economic recession the planning concerning employment and protection of the immigrants constitutes a basic concern. We have to seriously bear in mind that immigration can moderate the adverse repercussions of demographic ageing in the working market, making the planning of the policy regulations of the skilled and unskilled labor a basic lever for the smooth operation of the working market.

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