

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION TO GREECE

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1. What does the demolition of the immigrants camp in Patras mean? Does it mean something politically?

It is meant to show the government's newly-found firmness on the issue of illegal immigration. Unfortunately, this firmness seems to come a little too late as – under the present government - the issue was left to fester in the last five years. Instead of being firm in 2004 (as soon as the ruling centre-right "New Democracy" party gained power and illegal immigration was at a low due to the massive security effort for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens) the government followed the immigration policy of its predecessor: ex-post facto legalisation of illegal immigrants. Through this "policy", which was followed in 2005 and in 2007 and which had also been applied by the centre-left government in 1997 and in 2001, successive Greek governments sent out the wrong message to the immigrants' countries of origin. They gave the impression that Greece is "soft touch" and if someone somehow makes it into the country he/she will get a chance of regularisation sooner or later. Moreover, by offering regularisation, the governments essentially rewarded the breach of the law both by illegal immigrants (illegal entry/stay) and by those who employed them (hire of illegal labour).

2. Do you think the massive presence of illegal immigrants in Greece is a real problem for the State? If is, in what sense? (for example, for the national security, as a economic or social challenge, etc...) Has Greece a real migrant policy?

It is a real problem and quite rightly the European Commission's Vice-President Mr Jacques Barrot warned, after his recent visit to Greece, that "*there is a grave danger of destabilisation of the Hellenic Republic due to the completely uncontrollable waves of immigration*". When tens of thousands of people of unknown origin and of unclear intentions enter a country illegally it constitutes a serious national security issue and in the end it threatens even the national sovereignty as the country cannot control its own borders. Moreover, the entry of tens of thousands of illegal immigrants year after year has resulted in other side-effects: increased criminality and a (so far not estimated) added cost to the public services (medical care, schooling for the children of illegal immigrants, administrative costs etc). Finally, the change of the composition of the country's population has resulted in the ghettoisation of several neighbourhoods in urban areas and in the increase of feelings of alienation in the native population. Clashes between immigrants and natives or between different groups of immigrants are not uncommon, especially in areas of Athens city centre.

A real immigration policy should have a clear view of the country's needs for foreign labour, of the country's carrying capacity for immigrants, of the criteria and of the system for selecting legal immigrants. Such an approach was never followed in the case of Greece. All successive Greek governments did was to offer chances for the regularisation of illegal immigrants. It should be noted that the EU is clearly against large-scale regularisations and favours the repatriation of illegal immigrants. Specifically, the EU points out that (1): "*Within the context of a managed immigration policy the only coherent approach to dealing with illegal residents is to ensure that they return to their country of origin*" (p.19). The EU also emphasises that "*wide-scale regularisation measures...are not...seen to have a long-term effect in reducing the levels of illegal migrants, instead they may serve as an additional pull factor for illegal migrants...[R]egularisations should not be considered as a way of managing migration flows as in reality they often appear as a negative consequence of migration policy in other areas*" (p.17).

Commission of the European Communities, Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Study on the links between legal and illegal migration, Brussels, 4.6.2004 COM(2004) 412 final http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/doc_centre/immigration/studies/docs/com_2004_412_en.pdf

3. How do they feel the streets (so, the Greeks) the phenomenon of immigration? Shall we start talking about xenophobia?

A very recent opinion poll found that the Greeks' view on immigration, which was already negative, is hardening even more. More specifically, 93% of Greeks think that the country has reached its limit when it comes to letting in more immigrants. 62% consider immigration as bad for the country (54% in 2008), 52% believe that immigration hurts the Greek economy (47% in 2008) and 76% think that immigration leads to increased criminality (71% in 2008).

I do not agree with the term "xenophobia" because it may imply that the public's fear is grounded on irrational beliefs or prejudices. I think that the Greeks worry about illegal immigration because they realise that successive governments have lost control of the situation. If the government wants to combat "xenophobia" they must offer tangible proof that they have Greece's immigration problem under strict control.

4. Do you think the success of Laos party in the last European elections is linked to the presence of immigrants?

LAOS (People's Orthodox Rally) is the only party in Parliament who favours a strict and selective immigration policy. In the recent election for the European Parliament they managed to increase their share of votes by almost 74% (from 4.12% in 2004 to 7.15 in 2009). In several electoral districts in the ghettoised parts of Athens, the LAOS' share rose to 18%. Moreover, according to opinion polls that took place right before the election, the issue of illegal immigration came fourth in importance (after unemployment, rising prices and health care) for those who voted for LAOS compared to eighth in importance for the Greeks in general.

So the issue of immigration gave LAOS a considerable electoral boost. Do note that about 10 days before the election clashes between hundreds of Muslim immigrants and the police took place in Athens city centre during a protest for an alleged desecration of

the Qur'an by a police officer during a stop-and-search operation. The clashes and the public debate that followed elevated the issue's salience in the public opinion.

5. Last but not least, could you give me some figures about number and origin of immigrants in the last few years, please? Do you know how much centres for immigrants are actually in Greece ?

According to the latest available data Greece's immigrant population is about 1,250,000 people, 350,000 of which are ethnic Greeks from neighbouring Albania and the ex-USSR. This leaves about 900,000 non-Greek immigrants, 600,000 of which have a residence permit through consecutive regularisations. The remaining 300,000 are the official estimate of the illegal immigrant population in the country. About 60% of the regularised immigrants come from neighbouring Albania, followed by 5% from Bulgaria. In the last few years the numbers of illegal immigrants from Africa and Asia are also rising. They come either through the eastern (land and sea) borders with Turkey or cross the Mediterranean Sea in small boats. Taking into account that Greece's total population (natives and immigrants) is about 11,000,000 then, officially, non-Greek immigrants make-up 8.2% of the country's total population.

The table below shows that the majority of those arrested for illegal entry and/or illegal stay come from Albania. It also shows that a rapidly increasing number comes from other countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Somalia and Nigeria. At the same time the deportations that actually took place are very few in number compared to the influx.

Arrests for illegal entry and/or illegal stay in Greece

Country of origin	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Albania	173,957	36,827	35,789	31,637	52,132	57,466	66,818	72,443
Other	45,641	21,403	15,242	13,350	14,219	37,773	45,546	73,894
TOTAL	219,598	58,230	51,031	44,987	66,351	95,239	112,364	146,337

Actual deportations

2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
13,242	11,778	14,222	15,168	20,461	17,650	16,451	20,555

Currently, four reception centres for illegal immigrants are operating, with a total capacity of about 1,000 immigrants. The government has put forward proposals to establish several other centres which will take their total capacity to 5,000 people. Even if all government proposals are successful, their capacity is very far below the current annual influx of illegal immigrants to Greece.