# ALBANIAN IMMIGRANTS IN GREECE: FROM UNWANTED TO TOLERATED?

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### Abstract

*The main objective of this article is to present the way attitudes towards Albanian people and the perception of them has changed in Greece. The Albanians came to Greece following the collapse of the Communist bloc at the beginning of the 1990s. Within time it transpired that it was a mass immigration of approximately 500,000 people. Greece was not prepared for such an enormous influx of foreigners and failed to initiate an effective migration policy. The initial reactions of the Greek politicians, media, and society were negative. Social feelings, however, began to turn in the first decade of the XX century. Albanians ceased to be stigmatised as a threat and started to be perceived in a positive way through the prism of the demands of the Greek economy. The economic and migration crisis, however, lead to the reappearance of a xenophobic mood among the Greeks.*

*Key words: Greece; Albania; immigration; migration policy; assimilation*

### INTRODUCTION

The Greek-Albanian relations following the end of World War II were dreadful. Both countries belonged to opposite political blocks separated by the iron curtain. There were no established diplomatic relations between Greece and Albania until 1971, and the atmosphere between the neighboring countries remained distrustful even when the embassies in Athens and Tirana were opened. At the turn of 1987/1988 the ice was finally broken when mutual relations gathered pace and visits at the highest level took place - the Prime Ministers of both countries, Andreas Papandreu and Adil Çarçani, finally met (Czekalski and Hauziński 2009, 265-66). One has to remember that these relations were not warm or amicable due to the ongoing division of Europe into two blocks and the negative historical experience. The new chapter in bilateral relations between the neighbors only began after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the demise of communism in Albania at the beginning of the 1990s.

The division of Europe into two blocks also had an impact on the movement of people between Greece and Albania, or rather the lack of it. During the post-war period Albania remained internationally isolated, its citizens had no passports, and the borders, both with Greece and Yugoslavia, were heavily guarded from the inside by armed forces

and a network of bunkers. With the fall of the Communist bloc a completely new situation was created. The collapse of the centrally planned economy and the closure of state-owned enterprises contributed to a huge increase in unemployment in Albania. From the outset the Albanians attempted to reach the embassies of the western countries to attain documents indispensable to leave the country. They mostly applied for political asylum. These diplomatic posts, however, were unable to deal with such a great number of applicants and, what is more, the communist regime had fallen in Albania and the Albanians' motives were strictly economic and not political. But the Albanians did not forgo the idea and between 1991 and 1992 there was a mass attempt to leave the country to reach Western Europe in a search for well-paid jobs and a better existence. It is estimated that by the end of 1991 approximately 200,000 Albanians had left the country (Parliamentary Assembly 1992). The Albanians from the Balkan countries (the former Yugoslavia) mostly tried to reach Germany and Switzerland; however Albanian citizens aimed mainly for Greece and Italy (Hajdinjak 2005, 1-2). Western European countries, which were the most appealing (such as Federal Republic of Germany - FRG), were more difficult to reach due to their restrictive migration policy and well-protected borders (Rovolis, Tragaki 2006, 100). It comes as no surprise that the Albanian citizens chose Greece and Italy due to their proximity to Albania. Unlike Italy – which only has a maritime border to Albania – Greece was an easier goal to reach because of the land border. That mass exodus of Albanian people was certainly illegal. The 280 kilometers long borderline between Albania and Greece was no longer well-guarded by the Albanian army, and the Greek border guards were totally unprepared for the waves of thousands of Albanians attempting to reach Greece through the so called "green border" which constituted of wild paths in the mountain ranges stretching between Albania and Greece.

Some Albanian immigrants applied for asylum, however, a great majority attempted to remain in Greece illegally without officially legalising their stay. It is estimated that between 1991 and 1996 approximately 600,000 illegal immigrants came to Greece, around 35% of whom were Albanians (Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002, 190).


## GREECE'S REACTION TOWARDS ALBANIAN IMMIGRANTS

### *Migration policy*

The influx of a great number of immigrants left the Greek government totally surprised and unprepared. For a number of decades following the end of the civil war in 1949 Greece was a country that experienced an outflow of people and had never experienced the problem of immigration on such a scale. Hence, since 1929 Greece still had a law in force regulating the settlement and movement of foreigners which was related to the migration of people between Greece and Turkey following a war between those countries. In 1991 the governing party, New Democracy, introduced a new migration law that was much stricter with illegal immigrants and whose main goal was to curb and hinder the influx of foreigners to Greece. Special police forces were established to seal state borders as well as to perform checks inside the country in order to arrest foreigners without valid documents (Swarts and Karakatsanis 2013, 99). Obtaining a residency permit was directly related to a work or an education permit. Immigrants were forced to present a confirmation from a potential employer or school/college. Work permits were issued for a

period of one year only with a possibility to prolong them four times (Kokkali 2011, 165). An employer was obliged to attain a permit from a local government to employ a foreigner. Due to the fact that obtaining all indispensable documents was a strenuous and time-consuming task, a great deal of them decided to remain and work in Greece illegally. Common practices of the police were deportation and fines imposed on employers employing illegal immigrants. The strict migration policy transpired to be effective to the point that between 1993 and 1996 the influx of immigrants diminished.

The Greek government did not treat all immigrants in the same restrictive way. Among the inflow of immigrants to Greece at the beginning of the 1990s there were two groups that were privileged and treated in a special way. The first group were refugees (that being their official status) from the former USSR who had Greek ethnic origin, the so-called *Pontic Repatriates*. They were granted Greek citizenship and the process of their integration within the Greek society was largely supported. The second group that was privileged was Albanian Greeks residing in Northern Epirus (gr. Βόρειος Ήπειρος, *Vorios* Ipiros). They were neither treated as Greek citizens immediately nor were they granted Greek citizenship but their Greek nationality was recognized. Triandafyllidou and Veikou wrote that "they are perceived as refugees who suffered persecution and discrimination because of their Greek nationality and Christian Orthodox religion" (Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002, 199). Members of that group were granted a Temporary Residence Permit as well as social assistance. It is estimated that in the 1990s roughly 150,000 Pontic Repatriates came to Greece, and in addition to that number were 185,000 Albanian Greeks. The subsequent migration law was introduced in 1998 by PASOK - a social-democratic government - and it coincided with two events. Firstly, the Greek government signed an understanding with the government in Tirana which allowed Albanian citizens to take up seasonal work in Greece under certain conditions (Hatziprokopiou 2003, 1036). Secondly, a financial crisis that happened in Albania in relation to the so-called financial pyramids forced Albanians to search for employment abroad, mainly Greece. New regulations were introduced with the aim of legalizing the stay of illegal foreigners in Greece. Above all else, a so-called White Card was introduced which allowed for a six month stay during which a foreigner was to obtain legal employment. For those that were already granted a White Card there was an opportunity to obtain a Green Card - which was a residence permit for a period of one to three years, which at the same time constituted a work permit. For a person who could prove their residence in Greece in the previous 5 years there was a possibility to apply for a Green Card which would last for a period of 5 years. Such documentation also protected the holder's family from expulsion (Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002, 197). A special Identity Card for Ethnic Greeks was introduced to protect immigrants of Greek origin, mainly Albanian Greeks. More than 376,000 people benefited from the new migration law, 240,000 of whom were Albanians (Hatziprokopiou 2003, 1036).

An amendment to the migration law was introduced by the subsequent PASOK government in 2001. The amendment was to straighten out the illegal immigration issue. The scope of migration policy was received from the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection and forwarded to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This attempt was chiefly to decentralize the residence permit application process by creating regional immigration offices. Work permits, which constituted the precondition for Temporary Residence Permit, were to be issued in accordance with the demand of the Greek economy. They also allowed

the children of illegal immigrants to attend primary schools (International Organization for Migration 2006, 71). Naturally, this was done with a view of further integration.

In 2001 a census was conducted which showed that there were 762,000 foreigners in Greece, the majority of whom, as many as 56%, were Albanians. (Migration Policy Institute 2004, 5-7).
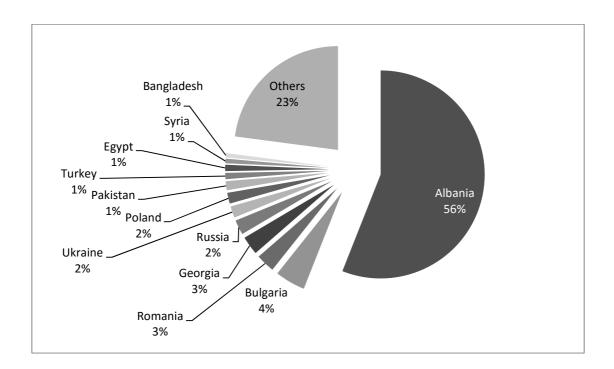


**Chart 1: Foreigners in Greece by the country of origin in 2001 (in %)** (Source: *Statistical Data on Immigrants in Greece: an Analytic Study of Available Data and Recommendations for Conformity with European Union Standards*, Migration Policy Institute. 2004. http://www.mmo.gr/pdf/general/IMEPO_Final_Report_English.pdf)

Undertaken reforms regulated the status of illegal immigrants only partially because the process was still too bureaucratic and time-consuming. The Greek government also attempted to streamline the deportation process of the Albanians from the country and therefore, as a result of previous negotiations with the Albanian government, a readmission agreement was introduced in 2001 (International Organization for Migration 2006, 11).

Between 2002 and 2004 the Greek government focused its efforts on creating a programme that would enable a wider integration of immigrants into Greek society but the results, however, were poor. In 2005, New Democracy implemented new regulations that were to make the process of regulating residency in Greece less bureaucratic. The residence permit and work permit were merged into one document. Following the requirements imposed by the EU, a regulation to grant residence permits for family reunion was enhanced (Swarts and Karakatsanis 2013, 102). But the fact was that the undertaken steps actually brought small changes to the immigrant issue. As Anna Trandafyllidou claims, the foreigner's integration programme within the Greek society practically did not exist until

2010 (Triandafyllidou 2012, 14). However, for the Albanians residing in Greece for a long time (a few years) any change that enabled them to obtain Greek citizenship was of vital importance. In 2006 the process of foreigner naturalization was liberalized although it was still a long, costly and difficult process. The changes, however, enabled Albanians of Greek origin (so called *Voreiopirotes*) - who until then had been refused citizenship despite their Greek ethnicity - to obtain citizenship. The liberalization of the laws helped over 45,000 people, mainly Albanians of Greek origin, to obtain citizenship in the subsequent 3 years (since 2009) (Triandafyllidou 2012, 15).

Subsequent changes that were introduced in 2010 by the PASOK government liberalized naturalization even further. In Greece, the fundamental law to obtain citizenship is still the right of blood (*jus sanguinis*), which means that the naturalization process applies mostly to people who can prove their Greek origins. Previous regulations required 10 years of legal residency in the country, a 900 Euro application fee, participation in preparatory courses for a Greek language exam that had to be passed, and general knowledge about the Hellenic Republic as well. The new regulations that were introduced in 2010 stabilized the naturalization process of foreigners without Greek origins. The requirement of 7 years of legal stay in Greece was introduced provided that foreigners applying for naturalization had to obtain long-term residence permits first, which could be obtained following five years of legal residency in Greece. Applicants for naturalization then had to pay the application fee (600 Euros), participate in preparatory language courses regarding a mandatory Greek language exam and a general knowledge exam concerning the Greek history and culture. Children of immigrants born in Greece whose parents had a documented history of five years of legal residency could also apply for a Greek passport. Children of foreigners born outside of Greece but who attended school for six years also had the right of naturalization. It turned out, however, that the law introduced in 2010 under the PASOK government was deemed unconstitutional and was annulled (Triandafyllidou 2014, 25).

In 2011 another census was conducted. It transpired that there were approximately 912,000 foreigners in Greece, 713,000 of which were citizens from outside the EU. Albanians constituted the biggest group - roughly 480,000 (Triandafyllidou 2013, 7). Taking into consideration the current population in Greece (11 million) and the fact that the census failed to account for the number of illegal foreigners, it was estimated that Albanians constituted 5% of the citizens in Greece.

In 2014 another migration law was introduced. The new regulations were driven by an attempt to solve migration problems resulting from the economic crisis in Greece and the subsequent waves of refugees from Arabic states penetrating Greece from Turkey. As a result of the growing unemployment during the crisis a great number of foreigners lost their jobs and in turn lost their legal immigrant status and inevitably were pushed outside the social margin, which consequently generated the growth of illegal immigrants in Greece. One has to remember that the requirement for obtaining or prolonging a residence permit for immigrants and their families in Greece was proof of continuity of employment as well as social security, which had to be done every year. The new regulations were to assist those who had lost their jobs and legal resident status. One of the vital amendments included in the new regulations was the possibility to legalize residency for people who entered Greece legally within 3 years from the introduction of the regulations but in the meantime lost legal resident status. The same applied to people who could prove that they

had resided in Greece for the last ten years but lost their legal status. In both cases, the authorities issuing residence permits would take into account the affiliation of those people with Greece, their knowledge of the language and culture, family ties etc. (Triandafyllidou 2014).

At the same time subsequent governments attempted to seal the country's borders in fear of a huge influx of illegal immigrants. A spectacular example of such action under the New Democracy government in 2012-2013 was Operation Xenios Zeus which saw identity verification of suspected people in the whole country, but mainly in the immigration centres, including Athens (Crepeau 2013, 4-5). As a result of the Operation thousands of people were deported from Greece, including 10,000 Albanians in 2012 and over 6,000 in 2013 (Hellenic Police). The authorities in Tirana accepted Greek motions for readmission of Albanians arrested for illegal border crossing or illegal stays in Greece without any problems. This was largely down to the readmission agreement from 2003 signed between those countries and their mutual cooperation in that matter.

With Greece facing a large number of refugees at its borders in 2015, which the EU labeled the refugee and migrant crisis, the Albanian matter was pushed into the background. Currently, the main problems for Greek politicians are illegal immigrants and refugees coming through Turkey from the Middle East.

### *The evolution of the Greek society's attitude towards Albanian immigrants*

At the end of the 1980s Greek society was homogeneous and consisted of over 98% of Greeks who belonged to the Greek Autocephalous Orthodox Church (Kolovos 2013, 7). It is a fact, however, that in the northern and north-eastern parts of Greece reside people of different nationalities e.g. Slavic Macedonians, Pomaks or Turks but they constitute an insignificant social group without any national minority status. Besides, the Greek government considers Pomaks and Turks as Greek-Muslims. What is more important, the "others" underwent gradual Hellenization mainly due to compulsory schooling in Greece. Greeks base their "Greekness" on common origins, tradition, culture, language and religion (Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002, 194). Greek tradition refers to Byzantine and Orthodox heritage indicating its links to the East along with the Greek Diaspora residing in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea and in the vicinity of the Black Sea hence the general support and acceptance for immigrants who came to Greece at the beginning of the 1990s from the former Soviet Union and mainly from the Black Sea region. Even though the knowledge of the Greek language among immigrants was almost non-existent, those who could prove their Greek origin were treated as "locals" and were almost instantaneously granted refugee status, social benefits and, ultimately, citizenship.

The Greek Orthodox Church played a vital role in building a positive attitude of the Greek society towards Pontic Greeks. During the entire modern history of Greece it was the Church that protected "Greekness" and Greece from others (Faas 2011, 164). It was also the Church that publicly condemned the Albanian government in communist times for the discrimination and oppression of a Greek minority residing in Northern Epirus, that is, residents of southern Albania of Orthodox religion hence the negative attitude of the Church towards Albanians associated with Islam (even though Albania under Enver Hoxha's leadership was officially an atheist country). Research conducted in Greece in 1993 revealed the negative attitude of Greeks towards Albanians and showed that Albanians were stipulated as the most hated nation groups after the Turks (Hajdinjak 2005,

7). Naturally, analyzing Greek society's attitude towards Albanian immigrants one has to take into account the fact that a peaceful and homogeneous society had to face the great challenge of the influx of thousands of immigrants within a short period of time. The greatest influx of immigrants took place in 1991 and 1997 (financial pyramids) when Albania suffered from a political and economic crisis. The media also took part in building the negative attitude of Greeks towards Albanians by depicting them as criminals, traditional enemies and invaders of Greece (Gogonas 2009, 98). What is more, the two biggest political parties - PASOK and New Democracy presented programmes of a tough policy towards immigrants in an attempt to gain political capital (Swart and Karakatsanis 2013, 99). It is obvious, that negative opinion towards Albanians had its grounding. As a result of the influx of hundreds of immigrants in the 1990s the crime rate rose significantly in Greece. Police would relay stories about attempted drug trafficking, house, shop and bank robberies, car and bus hijackings, and even armed robberies. In smaller towns Greeks formed self-proclaimed troops of "civic police" whose intention was to protect their private property and safety (Fakiolas 1999, 221). A peculiar panic in fear of an Albanian Mafia broke out within the Greek society which had been heavily incited by the media and politicians. We have to highlight that the criticism did not apply to Albanian immigrants of Greek origin who were treated in a positive way, and who were issued visas and granted work permits (Gogonas 2009, 98).

Ironically the negative social mood coincided with the process of economic inclusion of Albanian immigrants. They were employed by Greeks, legally or not, for work that Greeks would not do themselves (Fakiolas 1999, 221). They were employed to do the hard, dangerous, "dirty" work in agriculture, construction, fishing, tourist services such as hospitality or the catering industry, and the women were mostly employed to do the housework or look after children or elderly persons (Kokkali 2010, 10).

At the end of the 1990s, the opinion regarding immigrants, mostly Albanians, mellowed. The positive results of their presence in the Greek economy began to be noticed. Politicians started to praise the role of foreigners in the construction and agricultural industries as well as the inflow of social contributions paid to the budget. The fact that the government in Athens attempted to tighten the relations with neighboring countries, including Albania, resulted in the change of rhetoric towards Albanian immigrants. In addition, the then upcoming Olympic Games in Athens in 2004 motivated the Greek government to improve Greece's image abroad by presenting its society as hospitable, tolerant, and open to foreigners. It was a typical rhetoric of the PASOK left-wing party lead by Costas Simitis until 2004. They also forewent to emphasize threats that immigrants posed to Greek citizens.

Following 2014, with the end of the Olympic Games and when the right-wing New Democratic Party lead by Kostas Karamanlis took power, the social mood began to change. The economic situation began to deteriorate, the number of immigrants was gradually rising, and the accusations towards inflowing foreigners being "at fault" for the worsening financial results of the country became one of the campaign slogans of New Democracy. The negative attitude towards the new foreigners was perceived in the speeches of politicians, journalists, and clergyman and it became even more established with the growing economic recession. The outbreak of the financial crisis in 2009 became the climax of the negative attitude towards foreigners. The social mood intensified again instead of - a search for those to blame for the catastrophic situation of Greece began.

The foreigners were accused of all evils. Xenophobic feelings reappeared among Greeks. The most popular slogan repeated by the opponents of immigrants was their accusation of economic invasion which caused the labor market crash - foreigners were being blamed for the high unemployment. A lot of people lost their legal residence status as a result of becoming unemployed due to the economic crisis and great number of Albanians decided to return to Albania in order to find employment and wait the crisis out in their own country with hopes of returning to Greece. It is estimated that between 2009 and 2013 approximately 110,000 Albanians returned to Albania from Greece (Kalmouki 2014). But a considerable number of Albanians remained in Greece because of their families who they had brought over to Greece and their children who attended Greek schools. What is significant, however, is the fact the perception of Albanians by Greeks began to change. Albanians earned the reputation of being a hard-working and willing-to-assimilate people unlike Asians or Africans (Papastergiou and Takou 2014, 41). Politicians still criticized the new waves of immigration but expressed positive opinions towards foreigners in Greece with legal statuses (Swarts and Karakatsanis 2013, 104).

### *A change in the perception of Albanian immigrants in relation to the immigration crisis in Greece*

The refugee crisis that resulted from the Arab Spring developed alongside the economic crisis in Greece. The second half of 2015 saw the climax of the refugee crisis. It is estimated that 540,000 foreigners reached Greece (according to the International Organization for Migration). The problems related to the influx of mass immigration from Africa and Asia had begun much earlier. The majority of them wanted to arrive in much richer states such as Germany or the Scandinavian countries, which provide better social benefits than Greece that was overcome by the crisis. Nevertheless, a great number of illegal immigrants are still in Greece. They are mainly Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis, Bengalis, and Somalis instead of - nationalities whose culture and religion significantly differ from the Greek tradition. The rapid influx of African and Asian foreigners changed the way Albanians were perceived in Greece. One may say that their image improved considerably by the principle of comparison. Their assimilation in Greece began to be valued. Above all else, Albanians constitute a group that, despite its large number, ceased to be perceived negatively. Their behavior breaches no norms or values that are generally accepted by the Greek nation. What is more, Albanians attempt to blend in with the Greek society, which is extremely hermetic, by adopting Greek names and learning the Greek language (Drydakis 2011). It can be noticed that the assimilation resulted not from an efficient policy of the Greek government but the will of the Albanian immigrants themselves. A number of Albanians also decided to convert to the Christian orthodox religion which may be deemed as an attempt at artificial conversion for the benefit of social acceptance and thereby better work and pay. It does not change the fact that these attempts do take place. A number of Albanian children are also baptized in Greek orthodox churches. Albanian children willingly attend Greek schools, learn the Greek language and perform competitively alongside Greek students (Gogonas, 103-107). There are no signs of any infrastructure that would highlight Albanian cultural differences in Greece, such as coffee houses or shops (Kokkali 2012, 170). Greeks began to value hard-working and flexible Albanians, which resulted (before the economic crisis) in the rise of remuneration. What is also of significant importance is the fact that Albanians came to Greece as entire

family groups and because the children were involved it gave the impression that it was a safe migration that did not pose any threat or aggression. Their migration contrasts with Asian and African migrants whose groups consisted mostly of young men who began to gather in the city centers (Athens and Thessaloniki), which worried and concerned Greeks.

## CONCLUSION

Without doubt the perception of Albanian immigrants by the Greeks has changed for the better in recent years. Admittedly, the economic crisis and the recent immigration crisis enhanced Greeks' distrust towards foreigners and amplified xenophobic moods, but the negative emotions are mostly directed at Asian and African immigrants. It does not mean, however, that the Greek society has fully accepted Albanian immigrants. The fear of Albanian nationalism and the slogans regarding the creation of the Great Albania (Albanian claims to Southern Epirus) are still present among some Greeks (Kolovos 2013, 14-17). Unfortunately, Albanians are also associated with Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. The above-mentioned slogans appear in the rhetoric of some Greek political parties and xenophobic slogans find fertile ground in times of worsening conditions of the Greek economy. Hence the support (approximately 5-8% of Greek society) for extreme parties such as Golden Dawn. We have to highlight that Greeks are an ageing society. According to the research conducted by *Help Age*, a third of the Greek society will be over 60 years of age in 2060. People in their sixties will constitute over 40% of the Greek population in 2050, which will result in major problems with regards to the social security system (Salourou 2015). One solution would be adopting young, foreign people of working, productive age to the Greek society. And such are Albanian people. Without doubt a country without a great amount of immigration experience fears strangers. The problem, however, may be solved by implementing an efficient assimilation policy, which Greece has failed to do as yet.

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