Strategies of Social Integration in the Biographies of Greek Female Immigrants coming from the Former Soviet Union. Self-employment as an Alternative

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Introduction

The process of transition from one social structure to another, both as an individual decision or choice and as a phenomenon of the mass movement of an entire community of people, cannot be deemed as a phenomenon exclusively affiliated with some aspects of late modernity. Displacements of entire communities due to social, political, economic or ecological constraints and pressures are recorded in every single social history. ‘Diaspora’, in the true meaning of the word, constitutes a special phenomenon, however, repeated in time and space. The discovery of the ‘new world’, ‘holy wars’, national–imperialistic wars, economic crises, and ecological breakdown seem to account for many of the displacements of individuals and groups as they have been recorded in the history of humanity.

Within the geographical area of Greece, from the foundation of the Greek nation-state onwards, a distinction has been made between the indigenous Greeks and the Greeks of the diaspora (Greeks that live outside the territory of the Greek nation-state). An important, both numerically and in economic–political terms, number of Greek communities, which were mainly composed of businessmen and merchants, were located outside the periphery of the newly founded Greek state. These communities, under the pressure of domestic nationalistic movements, were forced to fall back on the Greek state, recognizing its priority as the centre of their business activities.

Later the geographical expansion of the Greek nation-state resulted in the distinction between Old Greece (Palaia Ellada) and New Countries (Nea Ellada) as well as a corresponding distinction between their populations. The Asia Minor catastrophe and the Russian Revolution contributed to the arrival of an extremely large number of refugees, predominantly from Pontos and Minor Asia. The distinction between the native population and refugees now became highly exaggerated. Between the 1920s and the 1960s significant numbers of people immigrated to countries in Western Europe, the USA and Australia, principally for economic reasons. See Karadinos et al. (1990), Karadinos et al. (1992), Mousourou (1991) and Mousourou (1993).
After the collapse of regimes in Eastern Europe, Greece became a host to economic refugees, primarily Albanians, but also to Greek-origin refugees coming from the former Soviet Union. This development changed the commonly accepted picture regarding Greece’s position in the division of labour and capitalistic accumulation. Greece changed from a ‘poor’ country, incapable of holding on to its labour force to a country that was able to absorb foreign labour forces in low status employment fields, particularly in the primary and building sectors. See Tsoukalas (1981), Tsoukalas (1987) and Vitali (1996).

In the case of Greece, this inflow of economic refugees has a transparent political dimension. The existence of a sizeable national minority in the southern area of Albania and the communities of Greek-Pontians in the southern territories of the former Soviet Union are regarded by those at the centre of political decision making as very important, and exercise no small amount of influence on domestic and foreign policy. On the one hand, refugees from southern Albania (Voreia Ipeiros) must be economically empowered to remain in their places of residence. This is accomplished by opening the borders to seasonal labourers who return home after their term of labour has ended. The Greek-Pontians problem, however, is of a different nature. Their communities, threatened by economic crisis and nationalistic movements formed in the south of the former Soviet Union, have formulated demands for repatriation, which, inasmuch as they coincide with Greek internal interests, have been accepted. This issue concerns the demographic composition of the population in the prefecture of Thrace, where the Turkish-Muslim minority is approaching the point at which it will numerically dominate the Greek-speaking, orthodox Christians. The plan of accommodating the Greek-Pontians, beyond its apparent dimension of solidarity with people of the same nationality, has a further dimension regarding the implementation of a policy regarding the alteration of the demographic balance of Thrace. See Bruneau (1998).

Recognition of this context is, in our opinion, essential to comprehending the life-plans of these Greek-Pontian refugees as it determines their opportunities and restrictions regarding their integration into the Greek social system and the labour market. We will endeavour to show that the formation of life-plans and, more specifically, the undertaking of enterprise activities involving the self-employment of Greek-Pontians is heavily influenced by the structure of opportunities and the restrictions that are posed by the political conditions of their integration and repatriation.

Additionally, the process of transition from one cultural framework to another, where significant differences concerning the values of work and education exist, is equally crucial. In this particular case, we are dealing with people who have been socialized in a social–political environment where the undertaking of enterprise activities is an unknown social practice. In countries in which, supposedly, socialism had been realized, the state formed the exclusive social institution that controlled productive activities. Individuals arrange their plans in such a manner as to achieve a better integration in already established productive planning. The transition to a ‘free-market’ regime is not just experienced as a ‘cultural shock’ but as a process of desocialization and resocialization to new values and social practices; new perceptions regarding the self and society. See Nauridis (1997).

The interviews have been collected as a part of the TSER research project.
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‘Self-employment activities concerning women and minorities: their success or failure in relation to social citizenship policies’. In this text we present two interviews, both with women who had had a university education. They immigrated to Greece after the collapse of the Soviet regime from former Soviet Republics, and were settled in the area of Thrace as a part of the Reception and Rehabilitation Project carried out by EIYAPOE. Following the logic of the theoretical sampling, this information constitutes elements that minimize differences. The cases are mainly differentiated according to the strategy of integration into the society of the place of destination and according to the degree of involvement in self-employment as part of the broader framework of the strategies of integration.

The interviews were conducted according to the methodological criteria of a ‘narrative interview’, which aims to thematize a life history and to prompt the interviewer to encourage a narrative mode of exposing chronological events. This enables the narrator to better construct and articulate his/her discourse according to his/her own priorities and conceptual framework.

The interviews were analysed by means of a structural reconstruction of meaning. The text is treated as a context of meaningful co-relations and co-references that transcend the communicative intentions of the narrator. The analysis seeks to decipher these meaningful structures and to cast light on their internal logic.

The basic questions, which the analysis of the interviews put forward, were directed toward the following issues: (A) In what way did the subjects apprehend themselves, their social world, and their position in this world after the biographical break which followed their enforced immigration. (B) What strategies of integration do the subjects develop. (C) What role does self-employment play in these strategies.

The cases that will be presented involve two different types of integration strategy.

Case: Flora

Biographical Course

Flora (F) was born in the city of Tiflis, Georgia, to parents of Greek origin. Her father was a driver and her mother worked in a factory. After she finished secondary school she occasionally did some factory work. Subsequently she studied and eventually became a teacher of French literature. During the last 5 years prior to her emigration to Greece, she was the headmistress of a secondary school. She is married and is the mother of three children: two sons and a daughter, who is handicapped. Her husband had a job in the army as a food inspector. Overall, the family lived a comfortable life without any particular economic problems.

She came to Greece with her family in 1992. The reasons for her immigration were in essence the anomalous political situation in Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet regime. They stopped in town A, Thrace, and were assisted by the organized programme for reception and rehousing being run in the area. In the beginning, they lived in a prefabricated house. After 2 years there, the family moved to a new house, their rent being paid by the EIYAPOE. Over these 2 years F lived with her family in a house that was supplied to them.
by the Institution in the city of A. The attainment of this house was helped by her being the mother of a handicapped child.

The interviewee learned Greek in classes conducted by the local NELE. For the last 2 years she had been working as a part-time French teacher in a school of foreign languages, after having acquired the relevant professional qualifications. Flora participates in the local Pontian cultural club; she has participated in public debates concerning the Pontian community on local TV; she is involved in organizing celebrations on national anniversaries. At the same time, F works in a family business, selling clothes. To set up this business they used their own capital plus a donation from the Institution for Reception and Rehabilitation.

The Pattern: the Undertaking of Representing the New-coming Pontians as a Chief Parameter of Social Integration of the Actor

F’s interview is characterized by an asymmetry regarding the articulation of discourse and a morphological constitution. The narrative parts are particularly limited. Personal experiences are mainly recorded as descriptions. What dominates the interview is a rhetoric, an abstract theoretical discourse, which strives to account for a ‘we’ perspective, understood as the collective experience of the newcomers and to express a collective subject’s demands.

This morphological data requires interpretation. This interpretation will be attempted by analysing certain parts of the interview. The interview begins as follows:

F: I was born in the capital of Georgia, Tiflis
I grew up there . . . but
my ancestors come from . . .
Pontos
my great-grandfather was a little child, six years old
when he went away with his grandmother
she took him away
they went to Russia, chased by Turks
and ee . . . he was brought up in Armenia, and then
my father came to Georgia
then I got a job in . . .
in several factories
and two years later I studied
modern languages at the University
and I became a teacher
I worked
for eighteen years; fifteen years as a teacher
of French and ee . . .
the last five years I was headmistress in a high school
I am married and I have three children
my elder son studied Greek in Tiflis
we came to Greece in 1992

The narrator begins the interview with a summarized description of her life course up to the point that she comes to Greece. What is evident is her
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inclination to dedicate the main part of her interview to her stay in Greece. The selection of the data she records retains a special importance in that it portrays the period before her immigration.

The first information that the narrator submits, after a striking beginning employing the personal pronoun ‘I’, concerns her birthplace and her upbringing. She was born in Georgia, specifically in the capital city of Tiflis. The emphasis she puts on her urban framework and upbringing is evident. However, after the information regarding her birthplace, the antithetical grammatical link ‘but’ follows. This differentiates her birthplace from the original home of her ancestors (Pontos). Continuing, there is a short journey back into the intergenerational family record, characterized in every generation by immigration or forced removal (great-grandfather, father, the narrator herself, her children). This particular discourse allows us to claim that the narrator sees herself as a participant of a collective destiny; that of the Greeks of Pontos. This self-understanding is fundamental for the construction of her identity.

The narrator refers to her personal professional trajectory. She emphasizes her university education and the autonomous professional career that followed an upward route, peaking in her position as headmistress. The mention of her professional achievement precedes her mentioning her role as mother or wife. Finally, the narrator briefly refers to her son’s studies in Greek literature.

We can infer that the basic components of the biographical construction as the narrator expresses them in this first supra-segment are:

(a) The high cultural and symbolic capital that has been attained through university studies and upward professional trajectory.
(b) The high living standards of her urban upbringing.
(c) Her Greek roots.

Morphological elements (i.e. the use of the antithetic grammatical link ‘but’ which differentiates the birthplace from that of origin) as well as the narrator’s explicit confessions (‘we lived there many years—more than 200—according to our ancestors who lived there—but we could not root’) allow one to presume that an antinomy crosses the biographical constitution of the narrator. On the one hand, there exists the sense of belonging to a separate ethnic group, which rests on an imaginary level and has been transmitted through time. This feeling defines the constitutive element of the collective identity. On the other hand, there exists a scheme focused on the achievement of an individualized life-plan, structured around studies and a professional career plan, that is marked by order, dignity, and economic prosperity. These two elements are constituent parts of her identity.

This antinomy had a latent form during the previous period. Initially, the impossibility of returning to Greece and the satisfactory standard of living in the Soviet Union were not conducive to the articulation of a biographical plan of ‘repatriation’:

In fact our dream was to . . .
from my childhood I had strong a desire to see Greece . . . but I never expected that I would come
I could not even think of it, because I knew it was very difficult to go to live in Greece.
Therefore, ethnic characteristics, as factors in self-determination, are significant mainly in the private sphere (e.g. matrimonial strategies) while the patrimonial dream of returning to the homeland is stored in the collective memory (Halbwachs, 1967) and functions as a common point of reference in relation to the ‘real home’:

*I always had in my mind what my grandmother used to say. Even at the moment when we were about to get married, and we had various proposals, let us say from Georgians, Armenians, Russians my grandmother used to say to all her grandchildren ‘children the time will come when we go to Greece. it will not be possible for you, if you get married to a foreigner. It is better to get married to one of our own people so that we can go together’.*

The momentous changes that occurred in the former Soviet Union, the collapse of the Soviet regime, the heightening of nationalistic tensions in many of the republics of the former USSR constituted a dramatic change in the objective conditions and on the manner the subjects perceived them. The emerging situation appeared threatening to those of Greek origin in these areas. The recollection from the collective memory and activation of the patrimonial dream to return to the ‘real home’ provided a type of a collective action pattern: the mass escape to Greece. This was greatly assisted by the formal invitation that the Greek state addressed to them.

Let us follow how the narrator refers to this decision:

*We left everything behind and we came here. What can I say? We had a proper life up there: we had our houses, our . . . life was quite good, we did not have economic problems . . . but then everything was destroyed and we had to come here. It would be a mistake to say that we were thrown out. When I came here, there was no civil war but . . . we understood that . . . I think that everyone should live in his fatherland, our real fatherland. Some people claim that the fatherland is the place where you were born but I think that my fatherland is the place where most of the people live. That’s what I think and I realise that that is the way it has to be. We lived up there for many years; our ancestors lived there for more than 200 years but we never managed to put down roots in that place.*
The arrival in Greece represents a break with the past course of things, with all its achievements. Immigration is characterized by ‘loss’ and ‘sacrifice’ (‘We left everything behind and we came here’). At this point the narrator makes a flashback to the former situation in the Soviet Union and she judges it: life was convenient, lived with dignity and without problems of survival. The collapse of the Soviet regime and the development of nationalistic movements had destroyed the existing framework (‘But then everything was destroyed and we had to come here’). The decision to abandon Georgia is less a choice among many possibilities than an unavoidable consequence of both the anomalous situation that prevailed after the collapse of the Soviet regime and the way the subjects comprehended it.

However, if we carefully observe the aforementioned extract we can detect two levels of discourse: while in the first part, the narrator expresses herself in terms of action and its etiology, in the second part she articulates a theoretical discourse. The narrator passes from the level of personal experience to the formulation of a theory that entails a normative demand, a ‘must’ (deontology). In the light of new experiences and facts (the growing nationalist threat), the antinomy between the ‘country’ where one was born and lives in and the ‘country’ that is defined in ethnic terms is resolved by the narrator, at a theoretical level, by deciding in favour of the second one, the ‘real country’: ‘everyone should live in his fatherland, our real fatherland’. Consequently, we can consider the previous data as a shift in importance of the elements composing the narrator’s identity. Through enforced immigration, experienced as a biographical break and as an admission to a new meta-system, a process of restructuring the way she comprehends herself and the nature of her identity occurs.

In what follows, we shall endeavour to demonstrate that within this new framework of relations, the balance between individual and collective identity is redefined and new strategies of social integration are developed.

It is significant that the subject, throughout the supra-segment which documents her period of life in the former Soviet Union, refers to herself through the perspective of the ‘I’—it is characteristic the way that the interview begins—as she continues, this ‘I’ is replaced by ‘we’. The narrator articulates a type of discourse that expresses the collective experience and promotes the collective demands of the Greek immigrants.

But how is this collectivity constituted? It is evident, as our field research confirms, that the group of immigrants of Greek origins from the former Soviet Union does not constitute a homogeneous group with respect to either their social characteristics, or situation, or standard of living in Greece. Differences are evident regarding conditions of labour, benefits and grants, knowledge of Greek language and degree of social integration. The narrator herself admits the existence of these differentiations. She classifies both herself and her family to be among the privileged ones: ‘My family and I are considered to be one of the happiest and lucky families.’ This remark is connected to the free provision of a house by the Greek state, the establishment of a family business with state funding, the recognition of her university diploma and the satisfactory degree of social integration attained due to an adequate knowledge of the Greek language. Thus we can detect an antinomy between the individual situation of the narrator and the situation of a collective subject, as she presents it in the
interview. This antinomy is masked during the interview by restoring an abstract, theoretical discourse, avoiding the mention of personal experiences.

Standing face to face with the interviewers, who represent for her the ‘generalised other’, the narrator distances herself from her personal life and adopts a position as a representative of the newly arrived Greeks from the former Soviet Union. The homogeneity of this group is constructed on an ‘imaginary’ level and is secured through a cohesive ideological discourse that has both a negative and a positive dimension. The narrator takes a stand against the negative view that concerns the prevailing stereotypical perception that these people are not ethnically pure, as the label ‘Russian-Pontian’ signifies, while she defends the Greek nature of the immigrants’ identity and demands a preferential treatment by the Greek state. In both cases, however, it is evident that the narrator perceives the Greek immigrants from the republics of the former Soviet Union as a distinct social group with common demands that need to be represented. She herself undertakes this task during the interview, adopting the position of ‘we’. There are, however, indications that this undertaking is part of a broader strategy for this particular individual:

A. The narrator is an active member of the cultural union. She attributes a potential political role to the union: the authority to express and represent the interests of the newly arrived Pontians.
B. Making use of her cultural capital and good knowledge of Greek, she has entered the public dialogue (being published in the local press, appearances on local television) defending the Greek identity of the incoming Pontians.
C. She helps to organize national anniversaries (the Day of the Pontian Genocide) that aim to strengthen historical awareness of the Pontians and forge a common identity.

We can therefore propose that in Flora’s case, the biographical break that her compulsory immigration instigated is accompanied by a restructuring of her self-understanding and of the constitutive elements of her identity. The latent contradictions that characterized her biographical make-up at the period prior to immigration seem to have reversed: her self-definition now emphasizes her identification with the collective. The ‘I’ tends to declare itself as ‘we’, not merely passively but actively representing it.

In conversations with ‘others’ (the interviewers, the ‘locals’, the state), the narrator articulates her discourse from the standpoint of ‘we’. However, within this ‘we’, she differentiates herself as ‘she, who speaks on behalf of them’, she who defends and articulates their demands, representing their common, unified ideological discourse. This is a new element in her personal identity, composed of the ‘materials’ of her biographical course: the possession of symbolic and educational capital, the utilization of her habitus, experience as a headmistress and her aptitude in learning foreign languages.

The assumption of the role of representative, more than just being a specific aspect of her self-identity, can also be considered to be a primary component in a complicated strategy toward her social integration within local society. Flora, as a representative of the broader group of Pontians, enters the public sphere of the local society through her privileged position. She becomes a public figure.
Other components of her strategy for social integration are her especially successful utilization of state funding. It is significant that the narrator has made use of all the possibilities offered by the rehabilitation project, such as obtaining a house, participation in seminars, obtaining funds for the establishment of a business undertaking.

Furthermore, the establishment of a commercial enterprise is integrated into the framework of a strategy for social integration with long-term aims:

\* At the beginning we had some money left but then the Institution gave six hundred thousand Drs to those who wanted to set up their own businesses as well as paying the rent for six months. That's how we started \*laughter\* we have this business but we make no profit out from it yet. Because whatever we sell, we have to buy it again and so we are in debt. We are supposed to run our own business but . . . \*laughter\*

We had to decide what to do, and since we knew the language and we were well educated, and so . . .

It is evident, however, that self-employment,\textsuperscript{20} constitutes a supplementary parameter in relation to the main strategy for social integration: undertaking the role of representative.

The motives of this business activity can be preliminarily detected in the intention to invest the capital that the family had accumulated in various ways (selling property in Georgia, savings from the exhausting work of the family members). An important factor was the fact that the EIYAPOE made subsidies available.

An additional supportive factor for the undertaking of this action was the advanced self-esteem of the actor regarding her knowledge of the Greek language as well as educational capital. This self-esteem overrode a possibly perceived sense of business risk and fostered an optimistic attitude regarding this venture despite the lack of previous similar business experience.

We can observe, therefore, that the undertaking of business activity is very well influenced by other priorities, not only by market research or business criteria. It is also characteristic that the family business constitutes an expectation of future economic profit. At the time being it does constitute a satisfactory business and it mainly functions parallel to, inasmuch as due to, the fact that the family members are working with a condition of dependent paid labour. The commercial business activity as a long-term perspective, incorporated into the general family strategy, presupposes the parallel work of the family members in directly profitable jobs (dependent paid labour). The business activity is comprehended as a family affair and presupposes the family network.

Case B: Simone

\textit{Biographical Course}

Simone was born more than 30 years ago in the capital city of Tatzikistan, a city of a population of 700,000–800,000 people, to parents of Greek origin.
Stalin’s regime had violently transported her ancestors there during the period of the great forced transportations of 1938–1939. She is an only child, which is not very frequent in the target group.21 Her father was a bus driver and her mother worked as an air hostess in the Aeroflot airlines. After studying dentistry and graduating, Simone worked as a dentist for 1 year. Later, she migrated to Greece together with her family.

She presents the hostile conditions that prevailed in the separate republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union as the cause for her immigration. Information regarding the existence of a Greek state project providing work and housing played a vital role in the decision to emigrate.

Town A was decided on as the place of re-settlement on the basis of the existence of a rehabilitation project. The Institution (EIYAPOE) provided full, free food and housing for several months at its installation as well as subsequently covering rent and providing some additional benefits.

On arrival, she aimed to obtain official recognition of her university degree. For this reason, she worked as a practitioner for 1 year in a university clinic in Thessaloniki, and simultaneously accepted employment in town A, first as a hotel receptionist and latter in a fast food restaurant.

Later, she set up a dental clinic where she had been practising for 2 years when she was interviewed. A very significant factor regarding this was the grant which she finally managed to obtain by EIYAPOE. This included rent payment for a 6-month period and a grant, amounting to some hundreds of thousands of Greek drachmas, for the purchase of equipment.

She learned the Greek language in Greece by participating in a 1-year training seminar and through everyday practice.

Her customers are mainly but not exclusively, from the target group. Success in a vocation of high status had increased her personal prestige both within her community and outside it.

**The Pattern: Successful Self-employment as a Central Factor in Social Integration**

The narration indicates a correlation of the factors that led the narrator to emigrate. Immigration is not a personal decision but both a family and a collectively imposed geographical displacement.

> The decision was made by my parents, I do not know (.)
> If things hadn’t happened there as they did we wouldn’t have come—
> why should we come?—
> we had houses, cars, houses in the country, work, all these—
> why should we come?

The use of the first person plural (‘why should we come?’, etc.) precisely underlines the fact that both the strictly individual and the broader family choice of immigration followed the collective pattern that developed. More particularly, we are speaking about the harmonization of a collective action under a state of pressure. According to the narrator, there wouldn’t have been any reason to immigrate—no unfulfilled dream of ancestry22—if things hadn’t turned out so badly. Initially, we observed the disruption of normality and the establishment of a hostile situation (‘those things that happened there’), that made everyday life extremely difficult. This unsettled situation is specified firstly by
economic collapse, which followed the collapse of the Soviet regime, and secondly by the revival of nationalistic elements.

Simultaneously, the posing of the question of ethnic identity as part of the process of national realization among the newly formed states of the former Soviet Union, and the economic recession, made the official policy of the Greek state, establishing a programme for helping immigrants from the area of Greek origin with housing and employment very inviting.

_The family who left together with us knew—_
_through relatives who had already emigrated—_
_that there was a programme in Greece—_
_which gave a lot of help to the Pontians—_
_if you don’t have anywhere else to go—_
_come and they will put you there—_
_this is why we went—_
 OTHERWISE it would have been a big difficulty to go around._

This shift ‘abroad’—as the narrator characteristically refers to it—would have been very difficult to manage without the involvement of institutional mediation (a project of rehabilitation, policy of encouraging immigration). Nevertheless, not by chance does the narrator choose the words ‘to be put there’ to describe the prior perception of the rehabilitation project. People potentially reconstruct themselves as ‘objects of manipulation’—a perception which is in agreement with the character of total institutions. This attitude is connected with the experiences made in the country of origin that functioned under a centrally controlled economic plan.

Both the process of immigration and the process of social integration of the narrator and her family are institutionally mediated. The narrator and her family chose to live and work in Alexandroupolis solely because of the rehabilitation project that functioned there.

_If there hadn’t been a settlement project_
_I would had gone to Athens, or Thessaloniki, or Mytilini,_
or somewhere else.

The initial placement, the provision of rented accommodation, the establishment of her father’s professional career and, more important, her own career development all occur within a geographical area under the control of the professional and housing restoration project set up precisely to these ends.

The act of immigration initiates processes involved in the reconstruction of self, within a new social environment, which constitute a new meta-system grounded on a strategy of social integration.

According to the narrator, her ethnic identity in her country of origin was a crucial component of the social self inasmuch as it defined particular aspects of her biography, such as matrimonial strategies. However, in the field of everyday affairs and everyday socializing, ethnicity was not an important component of social marginalization—until events occurred which changed things.
Before Gorbachev came to power—
they never paid attention to your ethnic background—
as foreigners we didn’t have the problem—
that distinctions were made between different groups—
putting some higher than others—
that started latter.

Regarding the present situation, the narrator has a mild way of dealing with her impressions relating to the issue of ethnic identity which, as a rule is a ‘burning issue’ for the target group. Her discourse is realistic and functions on the level of her personal aims rather than that of collective representations. Both the process of immigration and the personal biographical course are reconstructed on the basis of pragmatic data.

This approach to the collective and individual identity, the distancing from collective view formed by this particular group of immigrants and her orientation towards individual action, is adopted under the assumption that the narrator will achieve social integration by other means.

The narrator does not ignore the collective situation and the attempts of the people who came, as she did, from the former Soviet Union to act against their biographical brake. Her attitude toward the insurmountable difficulties that she and her fellow citizens encountered regarding their successful social integration, and in which she, to a certain extent shares, cannot be characterized as indifferent.

For myself—
I don’t like it at all—
that they made us—
put us aside. (…)
But everywhere discrimination is occurring.

The first person plural is used to sanction the imaginary identification with the community. Besides, it is not the first time that history brings people travelling on different paths together on the basis of an enforced geographical migration. However, in Simone’s case, we observe a distancing from the collective procedures that are developed by this group; and a revealing withdrawal into the private sphere.

Oh, I don’t know—
I’m not at all bothered about these things—
they don’t concern me—
neither politics—
nor associations—nothing.

This detachment from the collective practices of self-organization in the target group is connected to the narrator’s particular orientation and course of action. In Simone’s case, we observe an a priori individualized (atomocentric) orientation of action that is directed towards finding work in the area in which she has already studied.
A lot of time passed—
how many years? four, four and a half?—
before I managed to open my dental surgery—
during that time I worked—
as a cleaner and at a fast food restaurant—,
until we have saved enough money.

Biographical time is divided into the time before and after the achievement of the central aim which was the establishment of self-employment. This goal is thematized by an ‘I’ that is constituted around the axis of an individual teleology. Yet, the pragmatological conditions for the achievement of individuality are achieved through family support. The context of withdrawal into individual action is primarily the family. The ‘I’ used during the second biographical period, after immigration (‘Before I managed to open . . .’) presupposes the family collectivity (‘Until we have saved enough money . . .’).

Simone is the exception to the general pattern of professional disillusionment that immigration raises during the biographical course of the newcomers, especially to those in scientific professions. She attempts to and succeeds in having her university diploma recognized by Greek authorities. She opens a dental surgery clinic, which had been functioning for 2 years at the time of the interview. The status that the dentist’s profession enjoys in Greek society secures successful social integration.

This success should be mainly attributed to the specialization in dentistry, which allowed her, as happens with all the medical professions, to secure recognition of her university diploma and avoid an irreparable professional break. The cultural capital that was obtained in the country of origin is transferred unchanged to the host country and will constitute the groundwork for a successful social integration.

EIYAPIOE’s policy of empowering self-employment indicates a very crucial factor with respect to this predetermined route. According to the narrator, the prospect of government funding constituted a powerful motive for pursuing the responsibility of self-employment, providing vital help at the outset of the undertaking. However, it seems that the decision to take the risk of being self-employed had already been made.

Yes I was given money by the Institution—
they gave me some (x) thousands and paid my rent for six months—
Yes a lot of money was needed in the initial stages—
just to get the necessary equipment—
to open a practice needs at least three to four million drachmas—
and that (x), they give—
however little it is—
is very important.

Simone achieves ‘alternative’ social validation through her professional success. This allows a relative distancing from the target group’s main model of social action, which comprises the promotion of claims to the state.

The appeal to national identity no longer constitutes a ‘burning issue’ inasmuch as social integration is separated from the process of articulating claims to the state based on questions of ‘Greek-ness’ (ellinikotita). Thus the
determining nature of exchanges with the ‘local’ stereotypical discourse is reduced. Social integration is achieved through narrowly conceived individual and wider family action and, consequently, the rhetoric of defending her ‘Greek-ness’ (ellinikotita) becomes a matter of a secondary consequence.

Conclusions

As can be gathered from the analysis of the facts, the biographies of these women hinge on common ground, they share a common motive while simultaneously taking different courses. To a certain degree the selected biographies exemplify a common situation, in which an ‘objective’ factor activates the same practice, that of emigration. Immigration into a new social environment does not constitute an exclusively personal decision; this is a decision taken as part of an individual revision of goals and an individualized rational plan, an inclusion of the possibilities, the chances, and the restrictions of the individual and her social environment. The decision to immigrate to Greece was mainly a reaction to the crisis that the individuals experienced in the former Soviet Republics of Caucasus, a crisis with economic, political, and social dimensions which radically transformed and reordered the pre-existing ‘certainties’ of everyday life.

The two biographies that we analysed record the experience of ‘losing’ this ‘sureness’ which, up to the time that the crisis emerged, secured the coherence of both individual and collective identities, allowing for a stable orientation within society. From one perspective, because this crisis is a generalized one, it forces both individuals and collectives to renegotiate perceptions and conceptions that were deeply established in social time and space. Both the individual and collective decisions, which result from the crisis, are grounded in the specific realms where the crisis itself emerged (work, social position, income, physical security) and broaden to include the fundamental characteristics of existence, that is to say, the constitutive elements of identity.

Initially, the women share common social characteristics. They are socialized in an urban environment which particularly emphasizes the value of education as the basic means of entering the labour market and of formulating a life-plan that aims for upwards social mobility. Possession of an academic qualification and of an occupation constitutes the two fundamental pillars around which individual identities will be constructed. Incorporation into a minority group—although not completely ignored—is of secondary importance. We should remark here that the values put on education and work are internalized within the framework of very specific social–economic structures that are quite different from those of countries of the West.

To be more detailed, in the former ‘socialistic’ countries, entry to the labour market did not take place as the result of self-appraisal with respect to individually available resources, situational advantages, or restrictions. Both the educational path and the securing of a place in the labour market followed the automation of a strict state plan. Consequently, thoughts regarding an autonomous entry to the labour market or self-employment had been excluded from an individual’s plan of action. Typically, neither of the two women focused attention on the search for work in their country of origin. In the narrations, the work is thematized exclusively within the framework of immigration, because the processes of integration into the labour market of the host country demanded radical changes.
Immigration, as a return to the ancestral birth-land, involves a series of expectations concerning the restoration of a social position threatened by the political and economic crisis in the country of origin. These expectations arising within the context of a re-evaluation of an—up until then—secondary characteristic of identity, that is to say, identification with a particular ethnic group. At the time of the crisis, an aspect of identity, which hitherto has been kept in the wings, emerges to validate action, offering orientation to biographical paths that had been excluded. The wound of the biographical break is temporarily salved by the reordering of higher components of action, modifying the sense of ‘We’, identification with the collective. Greece and the Greeks function as an ‘imaginary community’ that ‘calls for’ the reversal of a path that distant descendants had taken.

As the analysis of the narrations reveal, the expectations of the female immigrants soon come into conflict with ‘reality’. Social integration, the regaining of lost social status or the acquisition of a new one comprises a difficult undertaking, complicated and uncertain in its outcome. The two women describe an intermediate phase of negative experiences that cover the whole area of everyday life. Residence, relations within the new social context, and, above all, work are governed by a different rationale, correspond to other values that the newcomers have to learn if they want to achieve their goals. The interviews roughly outline processes of re-socialization. However, without suggesting that the new context prevails completely in terms of values and codes of behaviour among the newcomers. Resistance still occurs at different levels whose main target is to guarantee the coherence and stability of the subject’s identity at the end of her life-path.

As the analysis of information given reveals, work and the absorption into the labour market continue to comprise the most basic aspect of identity along with efforts to achieve social acceptance within and identification with the new environment. Yet the rules and the logic of the game have now been completely changed. The ‘free’ labour market has replaced the state plan and the individual is obliged to create her own long-term projects. Within this context the women’s biographical courses, although they appear to have followed the same tracks on the ground of their common characteristics, begin to diverge.

Simone can rely on the advantage of the high value of her dentist’s certificate in the new labour market and is able to win social respect as a self-employed person, after the stage that we previously referred to. Flora has less valuable resources. The process of her social integration will follow different routes. Serving as a representative of the community will comprise different means to fulfil the same goal.

In conclusion, as far as it applies to the group of immigrants that we have studied, we can support the view that self-employment does not constitute a taken-for-granted choice. Self-employment may comprise one ingredient in a wider strategy towards social integration, of greater or lesser importance. From the cases we have analysed it can be concluded that the following factors play an important role in the decision to enter into business: (A) Going beyond a state-centred way of apprehending social organization, allowing ability to articulate an alternative model based on intentionality. (B) The formation of a professional plan and its realization which is related to a positive estimation of prospects and objectives. (C) The subject’s comprehension of the possibility
that he has to realize his ‘capital’ and skills by transforming them into a new project plan. (D) Accessibility to sources of state funding. (E) Provision of a network of aid (mainly the family).

Notes

1. The National Institution for the Reception and Rehabilitation of Repatriated Greeks.
5. The concept of the ‘type’ is not related to the frequency of its appearance, that is its representativeness, but to the particular logic of its construction (see Bude, 1984).
6. Greek Institution of Adult Education.
7. Greek-origin immigrants coming from the former Soviet Union.
8. We understand both ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ identity as the two facets of ‘social’ identity, where the former emphasizes difference and the latter similarity (see Jenkins, 1996, p. 19ff.).
9. ‘Of course there are many difficulties: we are refugees’.
   ‘Here we are called Russian-Pontians’.
   ‘As far as we are concerned, I want to believe that we are repatriates. Why? Because we left our country once in the past and now we come back to our fatherland.’
10. But even here we are foreigners. [laughter].
   Unfortunately, even here we are treated as foreigners.
   There is one thing that hurts me very much:
   in Georgia people used to call us Greeks
   but here we are called Russian-Pontians.
   The word Greek doesn’t exist.
   At least Greek-Pontians
   or Greeks from Russia.
   Because we do want to be called Greeks.
11. This view is also supported by the official ideology of the Greek state as expressed in the label ‘repatriats’ and by the official invitation of the Greek population to return to Greece.
12. ‘They must look carefully to find the real Pontians
   who came to their country with love
   and send back those who are not Greeks and do not want to live in Greece;
   those who cause problems to the Greek population and us as well.
   This is my opinion.’
13. The relevant demand is characterized by an over-estimation of the regulating role of the Soviet state based on interpretative schemes that fit to the Soviet model.
14. For a perspective that correlates the management of overall representations with the position of the managers of these representations within the system of power relations see Georgoulas (1995).
15. ‘... I want to say in few words how every Pontian Greek who comes to his country for the first time might feel . . .’
16. ‘I am also in the cultural union
   and it hurts me
   this problem, it touches me and
   I think something must be done
   for these people.’
17. ‘There were Greeks speaking Turkish.
   They have really big problem as well.
   These old people speak Turkish but not even Russian.
   Can you imagine their problem? Can you force them to speak Greek?
   They cannot and they will never be able to.
   And when they speak Turkish, it is said that even in newspapers that there are some Turks who came from Russia and demand a mosque.
   I was really upset.’
18. I: Have you published any of these poems?
   F: The local newspaper ‘Z’ had published one of them . . .
      and then . . .
      I was invited to appear on TV.
      That’s all.
      And by Genocide Day I helped little children to read some of them.
      In town halls.

19. It is worth mentioning that the decision concerning the enterprise activation is based on
    an individualized, rational utilization of the comparative advantages that come from the
    possession of cultural and material resources. Within the framework of business competi-
    tion, the possession of economic and educational capital and the knowledge of the Greek
    language are perceived as relative advantages that permit business risk. This logic of action
    is distinguished from that of the representation of common interest that is conveyed from
    the standpoint of ‘we’.

20. Of the families in the target group 26–27% are considered as having few members (up to
    three members), while the respective number in Greece is, according to the 1981 census,
    52.6%. The average number of members per family is 4.49 for the newcomers Greek-
    Pontians. At the same time, the similar number is 3.49 for the indigenous Greeks according

21. See Flora’s case.

22. See Goffman (1968) for the characteristics of the total institutions. EYAPOE had during
    its first years some of these features.

23. It is possible that the economic assistance, no matter how important it may be, does not
    comprise the only constituent for voluntarily involvement in the restoration project. The
    fact that the Institution undertakes entire responsibility, independent of the size of allow-
    ances or their efficacy, constitutes a valuable fixed point of reference for the immigrant
    group. This is even more crucial for the target group with their particular experience of a
    paternalistic state.

24. The practice of homogamy in the country of origin is revealed which, in the case of the
    narrator, took the form of normative expectation rather than parental imposition (‘they
    preferred it there’). However, in villages of homogeneous Greek origins the practice of
    homogamy was widely spread according to the narrator (‘there, they were married among
    themselves’).

25. The concept of biographical time refers to the subjective classification of life periods that
    is structured by breaks in individual history, as these are interpreted during the narration.
    These classifications of life periods are able to cast light on certain dimensions of social
    action inasmuch as they specify, enriching with pragmatological evidence (narrations), the

26. Read in plural.

27. Specialization in dentistry, and generally, in all branches of medicine allow the possibility
    of avoiding an insurmountable cleavage in the professional career owing to the failure to
    obtain recognition of degrees and subsequently of professional roles. This case constitutes
    an exception to the rule among the target group in that what is usually observed is a
    definite interruption of the professional career for those in scientific professions. Apart
    from the immigration process as a basic determinant, what also emerges is the lack of
    correspondence between specializations and the absence of an overall regulation by the
    Greek state.

28. The narrator is not married, is free from family or maternal obligations and symbolic
    obstacles. This results in a disposition towards undertaking of business risk, time for
    scientific education and specialization, in short, a convenience for the undertaking of
    professional responsibilities. Nevertheless, this factor has to be relativized inasmuch as it is
    mainly allowed by her scientific specialization and, primarily, the avoidance of an insuper-
    able break in her professional career.
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References


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