

# **Asian Migrants in Greece: Origins, Status and Prospects**

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## **1. Executive summary**

### **1.1. Key Findings**

- Europe is one of the principal destinations for migrants worldwide and Greece could not have remained out of the fray. Over the last decade or so, Asia has emerged as an increasingly dynamic source of migration, primarily because of its demographic size but also for a host of other reasons (e.g. low levels of socio-economic development in labour-exporting countries, hostilities and natural disasters triggering humanitarian crises, environmental degradation, political persecutions, etc.). Among the pull-factors for Asian migrants in Greece are the comparative wealth and stability in Europe, and the specific macroeconomic characteristics of South European countries, but above all the geographical position of Greece as a gateway to Europe. This last parameter explains to a large extent the role of Greece as a ‘stopover junction’ for many Asian migrants on their way to Europe. At the same time, one should not miss the trend for emerging Asian communities in Greece to further facilitate the arrival of other migrants from their respective countries.
- In travelling to Greece, most Asian migrants use land routes or a combination of land and sea routes (particularly those coming from South-Central Asia stretching from Iran to Bangladesh), whereas East Asians seem to arrive in Europe by air and then in Greece via other European countries. One should also distinguish between ‘individual’ and ‘organised’ travel, which would explain the widely varying evidence of travel cost. It appears that the overall travel cost depends on distance, the duration of the trip, job prospects of the migrants, charge modalities, etc. As for entry into Greece, there are serious concerns over the capacity and political will of Greek authorities to handle the flows of Asian migrants properly and on the basis of a coherent long-term strategy.
- Asian communities in Greece have been taking shape over the last three decades, since the first Pakistanis and Filipinos appeared in the 1970s, to be followed by Indians,

Chinese, Bangladeshis, etc. The spurious regularisation campaigns held in Greece in 1997 and 2001 left large numbers of Asian migrants in a state of uncertainty, which is still very much the case today. Since 2003, the influx of Asians has risen sharply, whereas some new communities (e.g. Afghans) have started emerging. It is estimated that at present the total number of Asians in Greece amounts to no less than 130,000.

- In their large majority, Asian migrants are low-qualified and low-cost workers in various sectors of the Greek economy: agriculture, construction, industry, trade and services. Very few Asian workers enjoy an insurance coverage and even then they are only partly insured. Pakistanis and Indians seem to be the most active or regular remittance-senders back to their countries of origin. However, it should be noted that there are many informal channels of capital transfer which are not easy to record.
- As regards the social profile of Asians in Greece, the majority are men with very low levels of family reunification which is a cause for concern. In a number of occasions, there appear to be insurmountable impediments for family reunification, arguably due to administrative and political reasons. The educational level of Asians is by and large lower than the average for the total of migrants in Greece. Learning the Greek language proves to be one of the biggest challenges for Asians in their efforts to integrate into Greek society. Many Asian migrants suffer from serious health problems, with tuberculosis and sexual diseases displaying a worryingly high rate of occurrence.
- The Asian migrants arriving or residing in Greece tend to come from specific regions in their countries of origin, thus bringing in specific social and cultural features, which remain largely unknown in Greece. No doubt, languages are a factor to be reckoned with and in many cases they appear to facilitate closer relations between certain Asian communities. Furthermore, Asians belong to various religions, about which Greek society is not sufficiently informed. Being highly 'visible' in physical and cultural terms, Asians are at a particularly disadvantageous position in Greece and their social integration is a truly daunting task. As regards the increasing mistrust for Muslims, including those coming from Asia, the Greek state has yet to live up to certain commitments, such as the construction of a mosque in Athens, whereas no attention seems to have been paid to differences among Muslims themselves (e.g. between Sunni and Shia). Overall, Asian migrants remain aliens to Greek society, among numerous grievances about the attitude of Greek public authorities, notably of the police. As a result, at this stage the social integration prospects of Asian migrants in Greece appear to be extremely limited.
- The highest possible levels of protection are provided to Asian migrants by their own communities. The spectrum of activities undertaken includes the creation of kindergartens and schools for Asian children, cultural shows, the provision of practical advice on daily matters, etc. While the flow of information to Asians certainly could be better structured and more useful, one should stress the role of newspapers and radio talks in the mother tongues of some of their communities.
- The main issues raised by Asian migrants in Greece relate to the legal framework and its enforcement (e.g. as regards regularisation and family reunification), the feeling of being exploited by Greek employers (e.g. the lack of social insurance coverage), difficulties in learning the Greek language, the attitude of the Greek police, etc. Unless

there is a tangible improvement in these areas over the next years, it appears that most Asians desire to either return to their countries of origin in due course or eventually emigrate to other European countries, if not other continents. In the current context of 'ghettoisation', very few Asians have meaningful and long-term professional or family incentives to pursue their integration into Greek society. Of course, this is not to say that the number of Asian migrants in Greece is likely to diminish in the long run. Their number is expected to continue to rise, even if under a Damocleus' sword of uncertainty and with a host of remaining obstacles on the road to their adaptation to the social and economic structures of Greece.

## 1.2. Key Recommendations

Clearly, many of the recommendations set out here do not refer exclusively to Asian migrants, but to all the migrants in Greece. As regards general matters pertaining to migration to Greece, relevant authorities could well consider the following course of action:

- Improving procedures envisaged for the regularisation of migrants, through the reduction of the bureaucratic burden, but also through the recruitment of staff properly trained to deal with migrants (e.g. on the basis of the revenue raised through regularisation taxes paid by migrants themselves). While the new Bill that is currently being finalised by the Ministry of the Interior does envisage some improvements compared to Act 3386/2005 on migrant regularisation, the biggest challenge of all remains the enforcement of relevant dispositions in practice.
- Examining the expediency of assigning the 'migration portfolio' exclusively to one of the Greek Deputy Ministers of the Interior. Furthermore, instead of creating a large National Commission (as the one envisaged in the new Bill), setting up a small and efficient Consultative Panel which will bring together independent and widely accepted personalities from the entire spectrum of social partners, including migrant communities. The principal mission of this panel could be the production of a report and a comprehensive list of recommendations for the social integration of Asian migrants.
- Making the best of opportunities under the new EU Framework Programme on Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows for the period 2007-2013, implemented through four target-specific funds: the External Frontiers Fund, the European Refugee Fund, the European Return Fund and the European Integration Fund. One may also consider the creation of a specialised Task Force for the provision of technical assistance to all the authorities and NGOs working on migration in Greece.
- Improving the performance of Greece vis-à-vis asylum-seekers, by considerably raising the levels of due acknowledgement and processing of their applications.

As regards specific issues pertaining to Asian migrants in Greece, one could consider:

- Negotiating bilateral agreements between Greece and Asian labour-export countries on the legal occupation of workers for a set period of time in areas, which are not covered by the local labour force.
- Examining possible legal modalities for bilateral agreements between Greece and the countries of origin of Asian migrants on guaranteeing their accumulated social benefits, so that they acquire a meaningful incentive to integrate into Greek health and pension programmes.

- Taking additional steps, both at central and local level, towards the facilitation of Greek language courses for Asian migrants. For instance, providing economic incentives to local authorities that host relevant educational activities.
- Substantially improving the mechanisms for information provision to Asian migrants in their mother tongues by public authorities and state mass media.
- Setting up separate and properly staffed services (Desks) in the Ministry of the Interior for all the sizeable Asian communities in Greece.
- Carrying out training programmes for Greek policemen and port authority officials in handling captured Asian migrants as well as the systematic use of interpreters, medical staff and social workers.
- Creating more openings for teaching staff in higher educational institutions on the history and culture of the countries of origin of Asian migrants in Greece.
- An initiative promoted by the Greek government at EU level, so that the increasing flows of Asian migrants (to which Greece is particularly exposed) are duly highlighted. The issue could be raised at the Council for General Affairs as well as at the Council of Ministers of the Interior and Justice. Another option would be the creation of an EU-wide Working Group on Migration from Asia to Europe.

Given Greece's EU membership, it goes without saying that most national initiatives will have to be harmonised with broader EU policies (e.g. under the Schengen convention). It would therefore be beneficial for the EU member states to engage in:

- The development of a long-term strategy aimed at addressing the push-factors for migration from Asia. The somewhat generic political discussion on illegal migration held during the European Council in Finland in December 2006 is a good starting point which will, however, have to be followed up on.
- The development of closer linkages between the Framework Programme on Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows for the period 2007-2013 and push-factors for migration in Asia, such as economic inequality. Mere border management and the provision of short-term incentives for the return of migrants to their countries of origin do not constitute a sustainable long-term EU policy.