

Support Fund for the reception and integration of immigrants and their educational support

Chrysanthi Protopogerou
Legal consultant

A number of characteristics of Greece need to be recalled when introducing the issue of migrants' integration in Greece. The country is ethnically quite homogeneous and has traditionally been a country sending rather than receiving migrants. Greece has had no substantial migration till the late 1980s. Indeed the country did not offer many advantages for migrants: it was a closed society in a developing phase, with low salaries and a significant capacity to use internal migrants for the industrialisation phase in the 1960s and 1970s, while at the same time a provider of external emigration. The few migrants that came to Greece were usually Europeans. Since the 1970s, the relative economic growth, its accession to the European Communities and the gradual retirement of Greek nationals from certain low-skilled jobs especially in the heavy industry, brought some labour migrants mainly from Egypt and the Indian subcontinent. Till 1989, though, Greece remained a predominantly homogeneous society.

Gradually, though, this situation changed. International developments, especially the political upheavals in the neighbouring countries, easier communications, political crises in the Near and Middle East, the changes in the migration and asylum routes and also economic growth in Greece itself made the country an interesting final destination for migrants. As a result since the 1990s, an increasing number of third country nationals entered illegally into the country. The growth of the migrant population was huge and sudden, mainly due to the proximity of sending countries, recently confronted with serious political and economical changes. Greece is a country at the external borders of Europe, with 700 km and also 1500 km of maritime borders to the East and South – almost impossible to be guarded and secured - and, to the North, along the river Evros for 114 miles, therefore also a transit country for migrants.

The waves of migrants – whether trying to reach Europe at all costs or to establish in Greece – put the country's as well as the society's capacity to integrate the foreign population to the test. In 1991, according to the national Census of that year 167.276 foreign citizens, mostly Europeans, were living in the country. The 2001 census showed that the number had risen to 796.713, while the country's population had risen in total from 10.259.900 (1991) to 10.964.020 (2001). And the migrants' number is still on the rise. Needless to say that the migrants included in the above mentioned waves are of mixed origin, destination and characteristics: the influx includes people seeking employment and better living conditions as well as people fleeing their countries in need of international protection but also in need of work, in order to survive.

The State, on three occasions sought to regulate the phenomenon of illegal migrants living and working in the country, the first two (the Presidential Degrees 358 and 359 of 1997 and the law 2910/2001) initiated changes of the previous legislative framework. Also the Directorate of Foreigners and Migration (now, General Directorate of Migration Policy and Integration) was established within the Ministry of Interior. Added to this, the Presidential Degree 188/2002 established the Hellenic Migration Institute, which acts as an advisor to the Greek Government on migration policy issues.

Finally with the law 3386/2005 on the "Entry, residence and social integration of the foreign population in Greece", as well as with the complementary provisions of Law Nr. 3536/2007, the

Ministry of Interior, Public Administration and Decentralisation made an attempt, in addition to regulating legal migration, to "legalise" the large numbers of migrants who already lived and worked illegally in Greece. Also, bilateral agreements with certain countries (e.g. Egypt, Philippines, Albania) address legal migration in relation to specific – seasonal – vocations.

Furthermore, the said legislative act (3386/2005) formulated, for the first time, the Basic Principles of the national Integration Policy: social integration of migrants is set as a primary goal of the State offering to migrants their proportionally equal participation in all aspects of social, economic and cultural life in the host country, made effective through the recognition of their rights. The law also makes reference to the General Principles that foster and enable the actual exercise of the rights: the prevention of discriminations of any kind, the pursuance of equal treatment and the implementation and respect of cultural and religious diversities. In this field, the national policy on integration addresses its efforts in achieving the due balance between the obligations of migrants to respect the values and principles of the national society, its social coherence, with their legitimate rights to preserve their identity.

The Law 3536/2007 establishes a "National Committee for the Integration of Migrants" within the Ministry of Interior: it is an intergovernmental administrative instrument composed by representatives from different levels of central, regional and local government, as well as social partners and civil society representatives, in charge of managing, coordinating and monitoring action plans and programmes fostering integration. Such actions and programmes have been repeatedly realised by the Ministry of Employment and Social Protection, its competent authorities and other Ministries, funded or co-funded by the European Union.

Finally, in 2008, through a joint ministerial decision by several ministries (Interior, Education, Employment and Social Protection, , External Affairs, Economy, Justice, Development, Culture and Health), Greece set the main framework for the adaptation and social integration of the foreign population, legally established in the country. This set of actions is entitled "ESTIA" and it is a comprehensive Action Plan with a "holistic approach" of the Greek policy towards the urgent need to safeguard social coherence, provide better access to services for migrants and increase their involvement in all aspects of social, public and private, life leading to their empowerment in order to be able to achieve "feasible and independent participation regardless of any state intervention".

With this context in mind, we wish to enter the main thrust of the debate concerning Spanish policy on integration. Indeed, the Spanish paper on "Immigrant Reception, Integration and Educational Support Fund" under discussion could offer an essential tool in better understanding the challenges that Greek migration policy is facing.

Firstly, it is worth noting that both the society and State services and public policy in Greece have found themselves confronted with an "exponential" growth of migration waves, perhaps in a process even more intense, sudden and persistent than in the case of Spain. The pressure put on welfare services and on labour market control mechanisms was, and still is, relentless.

Unlike Spain, though, Greece had never in the past encountered immigration as a social phenomenon. Thus, the legislative and the social framework were inadequate for the new circumstances. In 15 years (since 1991) three legislative acts and innumerable circulars. Therefore the Spanish model has an added value in the efforts of Greece to address, in a coherent way, the issue of migrants' integration.

When examining, though, which concrete relevance specific measures taken by Spain could have over the Greek immigration and integration policy and, even more, whether there is a potential transferability of the Spanish framework to Greece, one should bear in mind the following particularities:

- Firstly, in terms of immigration policy, the very sudden influx of illegal migration in the years 1991 -1997 originated from neighbouring countries on the immediate North of the country, leading to their “informal” integration and the legislative legalisation of their residence in three waves, the last being in the year 2005 (for those of the illegal migrants already established till 2004), starting a serious attempt of addressing the new situation of Greece as host country of migrants. The registered foreign population has a significant predominance of one neighbouring nationality (Albanians, make up more than ½ almost 2/3 of the total immigration population).
- The reactive rather than pro – active State response to the phenomenon of migration is further combined to informal economy, a serious problem that the Greek Government seeks to solve, also as far as nationals are concerned.

Some particularities of the Greek welfare and integration system should also be taken into consideration. Up to 2005 – 2007, integration was only addressed through a mainstreaming approach: migrants were entitled, as Greek nationals, to benefits in social security and health services if they fulfilled the same conditions.

The education system is accessible to foreign pupils, even those with parents illegally established in Greece, but with limited measures towards the adaptation and support for those pupils: legislative initiatives have been adopted to foster access to education, to some extent even for illegal migrants.

To be more specific, compulsory (primary and high school) education is in Greece an obligation for minors till 16th year of age. Law 2416/96 sets the framework for the unobstructed access of migrant minors to education through the provision of appropriate personnel and services, the access to appropriate educational schemes (Greek language lessons, supportive teaching, integration classes, cross-cultural schools). Specific legislation provisions facilitate the enrolment in school of foreign minors (in case of incomplete documentation of the parents, required under general provisions) and a procedure of determining the educational level of the new pupils is also provided. The legislative framework includes also measures for the prohibition of school dropping and the encouragement of further education (positive exclusion measures towards a “favourable” treatment of pupils with no Greek nationality during the first years of schooling and – until recently – “favourable” access to university education).

When registered and legally employed, migrants face together with nationals the existing shortcomings in all aspects of Greek social policy. The lack of family and personal supporting “environment” (the so called Mediterranean Model were family, personal and social networks supplement in many respects the public services support, which in many cases is not enough) could, in the case of migrants, be only replaced by some assistance from co - nationals.

In the sphere of governance, immigration management and integration policy are mainly issues pertaining to the central state authorities. Despite that, competence fragmentation amongst diverse ministries without coordination system fully capable to monitor the allocation of the expenditures and the setting of priorities makes the adaptation of a cross-cutting relevant public policy rather difficult.

High hierarchisation, administrative centralism, structural weaknesses in local and regional level, limited activation of the non - governmental actors remain ever key issues, towards the fulfilment of the integration objectives, such as transfer of information, the perception and evaluation of the reality on the ground and concluding to a well – addressed funding of all relevant activities.

The need for a holistic approach in all aspects of integration was one issue that the recent legislation tried to deal with, starting a serious attempt of addressing the situation of Greece as host country of migrants.

Aiming to safeguard access to fundamental rights and civil services, to prevent social exclusion and to reinforce the participation of migrants in the labour market, measures have been initiated recently in Greece by multilateral administrative structures. Despite the absence of tradition and experience, in relation to other European countries, actors of the civil society have actively intervened, especially in the major cities (Athens, Thessaloniki) where the majority of the migrant population lives, filling in several areas the shortcomings of the State services, enabling access to civil services, providing information, language courses and reception facilities.

As for most recent positives developments: the harmonisation of national legislation to the Directive for family reunification (P.D. 131/2006), the application of the Presidential Degree Nr. 150/2006 (long term resident Directive) leading, through the provided language and basic principles (history – civilization) courses, to a five – years residence permit. Finally, the intention to associate the long term residence permit with a voting right (participation to municipal and regional elections).

The question remains – given the competence fragmentation and the diversity of priorities: the coordination of integration measures into a cross – cutting policy.

According to the a/m described Greek circumstances, the federal model of Spain with the extensive powers pertaining to the autonomous regions cannot be emulated. Despite the development of regionalisation in the last years and the granting of competences to local and regional levels, these latter are still administrative weak and in some cases lacking the adequate human resources to administer integration. Given that both these levels have no power of raising taxes directly and are dependent upon the State for financing, means that in Greece integration efforts should originate mostly from Athens. Also, the lack of the Spanish tradition in a significant participation of the civil society means that the State cannot delegate significant integration tasks.

Nevertheless, the “Support Fund” sets a good road – model for the Greek reality, clarifying essentials necessities of integration policy.

Area of significant value for Greece is the precise and accurate registration of the needs and the consequent allocation of funding. Such breakdown may allow overcoming the significant overlapping and the fragmentation of competences between services.

Evaluating the areas of action included in the Fund, we feel that, for us at least, a clarification of the term and contents of the “reception” post and the apportionment of funding (if any) within this specific area would be of assistance. What exactly does Spain include under this heading and which actions are eligible for funding thereupon? It would be of interest to us in particular regarding the above-mentioned lack – until recently – of any effort to reinforce the migrants’ access to Greek society and public services. Providing specific care to vulnerable cases, through the reception funding raises the issue of the extent, the characteristics and the permanence of the

funded services, taking into account the fact that in Greece these areas of support could require the intervention of several public services.

Given that the integration objectives have a long term perspective and that they bear fruit in the long run, it is imperative that integration actions are allowed to develop for a much longer period than a couple of years of a legislative period. It is also important to allow inter party agreement on the integration purposes and objectives, so as to avoid a complete modification of the rules of the game following a governmental change (In the model under discussion agreement between different levels of government).

The contribution of the immigrants in the shaping up of the programme is related to the actual knowledge of the situation and the needs the whole integration policy attempts to fulfil. Acknowledgment of the reality, precise determined purposes and realistic approach of the objectives combined with pre – designed involvement of all actors (public and privates) lead further to the better exploitation of all available funding resources, implicated in a long term national strategy.

The further examination of the model under discussion is certain to provide a useful practical and “on the field” evaluated example within the negotiation of all above topics Greek integration policy has yet to encounter.