

SEESOX Diaspora
Working Paper
Series
No. 7



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Emigration from Greece at times of crisis*

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June 2019

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Social and discursive constraints and the decision to leave: emigration from Greece at times of crisis¹

Manolis Pratsinakis

Abstract

In a 1981 article, Kubat and Hoffmann-Nowotny inverted an underlying assumption in most migration theories: namely, the belief that people are essentially sedentary. Claiming that people are mobile by nature meant subscribing to yet another essentialism. However, despite its crudeness, their thesis does have analytical value in deconstructing the belief that people are free agents and highlighting that individual migrants decide whether or not to move within social and discursive constraints. This paper explores this issue by focusing on the Greek emigration that followed the country's economic crisis. It draws on 34 in-depth interviews with Greek migrants in Amsterdam and London, and data from a survey conducted in Greater London and the Netherlands. Recession and austerity in Greece has made migration a survival strategy for several people. However, there are many more, in less pressing need, also leaving the country who present their migration as something they were considering already long ago. Focusing on the latter category, the paper discusses how the crisis in Greece has altered everyday discourse on emigration and loosened up social constraints towards long distance mobility, ultimately altering the emigration environment in the country. It further suggests that emigration may be expected to continue irrespectively of the developments in terms of the Greek economy's performance.

Keywords: Greek crisis, Greek emigration, emigration environment, migration decision making, migration aspirations.

Introduction

In the years preceding the crisis, Greek citizens have been amongst the least mobile Europeans. A Eurobarometer survey on geographic and labour market mobility, conducted in 2005, showed that they were the least favourable Europeans, after the Cypriots, towards long distance mobility (European Commission, 2006). Another survey, conducted in 2009, just a year before the crisis started deepening in Greece, showed that only 8% of Greeks envisaged working abroad sometime in the future (the lowest after that of Italians). At the same time, the share of Greeks who would be ready to work in some other country in case of unemployment at home, was found to be well below the EU average (European Commission,

¹ This working paper draws on data from the EUMIGRE project, which was funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 658694.

2010). Yet this was soon due to change. In the context of the debt crisis, recession, austerity and their socio-political consequences, Greece experienced a new major wave of out-migration. More than 400,000 Greek citizens left the country from 2010-2017, making Greece a country with one of the highest emigration rates in the EU.

This paper aims to explain the motivations underlying migration decisions from Greece in the period of crisis. In so doing, it illustrates how the crisis has imperatively impacted on the emigration environment (Carling, 2002) in Greece, by altering everyday discourse on emigration and loosening up social constraints towards long distance mobility. Exploring the migration aspirations of the emigrants, their social networks abroad and the reactions of friends and kin back home on their decision to leave, the paper highlights and analyses the paramount significance of "the social" in migration decision-making. At the theoretical level it aims to relativise the monocausal character of several theories, such as the macro and micro neoclassical theory and world system theory (for an overview see Massey et al., 1993), that explain migration by attributing a deterministic significance to economic factors in dispense of social and/or political factors. Such theories support their premises with reference to perceptions on how rationally acting individuals make choices or with reference to the structure of the world economy. However, they prove insufficient when one tries to empirically assess what happens on the ground, enquiring how and why decisions to leave one's country are actually taken. My thesis is that 'the economic' and 'the social' are so much entangled in real life to the extent any theory that does not sufficiently look at one or the other is not only partial, but misleading too. A second aim of this paper is thus to bridge between abstract analytical explanations and the complex character of people's actual migration decision making.

The resurgence of the Greek emigration in the past few years serves as a suitable so-called extreme case study option (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) for such a twofold task. As seen in Figure 1, emigration from Greece rose steeply with outflows tripling within a timespan of three years from 2009 to 2012 and has remained at high levels since then. Its sudden and immediate increase following the deepening of the crisis in Greece seems to indicate the direct link between the two. It is, however, argued that the increase of migration was very strongly mediated by developments that we would analytically categorise as falling within the social domain.

Methodology

The paper is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. It primarily draws on 34 in-depth interviews with Greek migrants in London and Amsterdam, two major destinations of the new Greek emigration. The interviews were conducted with migrants of different age groups, with the majority falling in the 25-35 age group, and were approximately equally split between men and women and between higher and lower educated people. Twenty two of the interviews were conducted with migrants in Greater London and 12 in

Amsterdam. The main themes of the interview were reasons for migration, experiences of work and life in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands and plans for the future. The average interview time was 1 hour and a half and all interviews were recorded. After the initial interview I had the chance to meet again with several interviewees and chat further with them on their experiences, views and plans. Interviewees were accessed via personal networks and snowballing, as well as through community organisations. In Amsterdam, further data were collected through participant observation in the Greek community organisation “Neoafihthendes”, which provides information and support to newcomers in the Netherlands and in which I offered voluntary work from November 2015 until May 2017. Pseudonyms are used to maintain participants' anonymity.

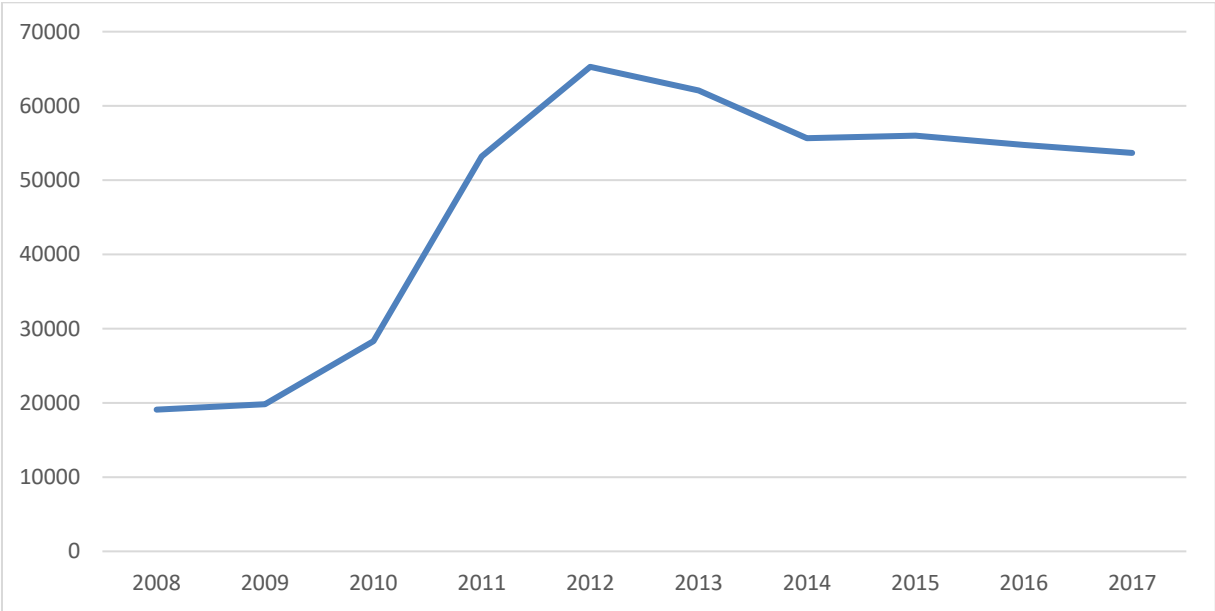


Figure 1. Estimated annual emigration of Greek citizens, 2008-17
 Source: Eurostat (http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_emi1ctz&lang=en)

Secondarily, the paper draws from a survey (EUMIGRE survey) which was conducted in Greater London and the Netherlands from January to June 2017, generating a dataset comprising of 996 respondents in total. The survey was conducted through a combination of sampling methodologies. Due to the lack of a sample frame, transnational populations such as those addressed in the present study are impossible to reach using traditional survey modes. To account for this limitation, the EUMIGRE survey relied on a strategy that combined web-based “respondent-driven sampling” (RDS) and opt-in online survey sampling. According to RDS, a diverse group of respondents, the so-called ‘seeds’, initiated the respondent recruitment in the Netherlands and Greater London in the following manner: once they filled in the online questionnaire, they were asked to send invitations with a personalised survey link to up to three of their Greek acquaintances in the Netherlands and Greater London (people older than 20 years old and who have stayed in the Netherlands or the UK for a minimum of 6 months). New referrals were asked to recruit further, creating several chains of referrals. Three hundred and seventy respondents in the Netherlands and 100 respondents in

Greater London were recruited through this method and the sample was expanded further via the opt-in methodology generating a total of 996 respondents. The link of the survey was posted on the website of the EUMIGRE project and it was disseminated via Facebook group pages of Greek communities in London and the Netherlands targeting categories (such as people with lower educational attainments) that were not sufficiently included via the RDS methodology.

Seven of the interviewees, as well as 197 survey respondents, had emigrated before 2010 allowing for comparisons between the pre and post-crisis migrants. Both the survey and the interviews were carried out in the context of the EU funded Marie Curie EUMIGRE project.

The demographics of the emigration flow

In the postwar era up until the 1970s approximately one million Greeks, mostly people with little formal education, left their country to fill the gaps in the booming industrial sectors of Western countries. Since the mid-1970s outmigration was limited, concerning emigrants of the post-war waves and their offspring moving between Greece and European destinations (Fakiolas & King, 1996). After the establishment of the right to free movement, employment and settlement across the European Union (EU) for Greek citizens in 1988, emigration became more frequent among specific groups, such as Muslims from the minority of Thrace spending spells of employment in Turkey or Germany (Pratsinakis, 2002), or, later on, the (then recently settled) diaspora Greeks from the former Soviet Union (Pratsinakis, 2013; Voutira, 2006), as well as increased number of students going abroad (Karamessini, 2010). Above all, there has been a continuous outflow of professionals that started becoming prominent in the 1990s, and comprised the largest segment of the flows after 2000 (Labrianidis & Pratsinakis, 2016). Yet, the outmigration of graduates, as well as of other socioeconomic categories, intensified dramatically as job opportunities in the private sector shrank further in the shadow of the crisis and cuts and restrictions in new recruitments were imposed in the public sector.

Emigration outflows during the crisis period seem to be correlated with unemployment rates, which skyrocketed in Greece from 7.9% in 2009 to 27.4% in 2013, and be inversely correlated to the average disposable income in Greece that shrunk from 93.8 of the EU mean in 2009 to 68.8 in 2013 (Lazaretou, 2016, p. 40)². Yet are those who leave Greece the unemployed and/or the most vulnerable socioeconomically? A recent study by Labrianidis and Pratsinakis (2016) helps answer this question. This study conducted a nationwide representative survey of 1237 households in Greece, gathering information for 248 emigrants. About one third of them left Greece after 2010 while the rest had migrated in earlier decades, allowing for observations of changes over time.

² Unemployment rates decreased in the following years reaching 18.6 in the beginning of 2019 yet they still remain the highest in the EU. The situation concerning household income in Greece did not ameliorate with Greece having the fifth lowest levels of gross household adjusted disposable income per capita in 2017 at 66,6% of the EU-28 average.

According to Labrianidis and Pratsinakis, in the past few years there was indeed a steep increase in the emigration of unemployed people who account for 51% of the total emigrant outflow during the crisis period (as compared to 27% in the 2000s and 17% in the 1990s)³. However, even though lack of a job seems to be a major contributor driving people out of the country, it is not a necessary condition given that according to the Labrianidis and Pratsinakis survey one in two of the post-2010 emigrants was employed at the time of emigration⁴. Similar are the findings on the economic situation of household of the emigrant. The adverse socioeconomic position in which many people have found themselves as a result of years of austerity politics in Greece led to an increase in the rate of emigration of people from 'low to very low' income households. While before the crisis this category used to be the least prone to emigrate, they were found to constitute 28% of the post-2010 emigration outflow, a percentage that is on a par with their share in the overall sample. Yet despite the significant increase in the emigration of people from lower income categories, they still form a minority among the emigrants.

Two more findings from this study are relevant here. First, in terms of the emigrants' educational background, as mentioned earlier, in the 2000s people with higher educational credentials were more prone to emigrate, a tendency that continues strong during the crisis period when approximately two out of three of the migrants are university graduates. Second, even though the vast majority of migrants are still young adults, the migrants' average age grows by emigration decade: from 24.3 years in the 1990s to 28.3 years in the 2000s and 30.5 years among post-2010 emigrants, with 11% of the post-2010 migrants having taken the decision to migrate after their forties

Overall, the changes in the demographic profile of the emigrants recorded during in period of crisis do clearly point to an increase in the emigration of more socioeconomically vulnerable categories such as the unemployed, people from low income families as well as older people. However, a considerable degree of continuity is also recorded with the majority of the migrants being still young, highly educated and coming from middle-class families as was the case during the previous two decades.

Choice and necessity and the decision to leave during the crisis

In the early phase of my qualitative research I considered the distinction between choice and necessity a useful analytical tool to assess migration motivations from crisis-driven Greece. In comparison to the pre-crisis period it can be hardly controversial to argue that emigration from Greece has undergone a shift from mostly being a (career) choice to a decision largely

³ To a certain extent this increase is to be expected given the high unemployment rates in Greece during the crisis period which went as high as 44% in 2013 for the 25-29 age group – an age group that is overrepresented among the migrants.

⁴ This finding is further corroborated by the EUMIGRE survey according to which the share of the post-2010 Greek migrants in Greater London and the Netherlands who were unemployed at the time of emigration was 44%.

shaped by necessity⁵. Necessity is here understood not in the limited sense of absolute economic need, but rather framed in terms of a wider context of lack of prospects in Greece (Pratsinakis, Hatziprokopiou, Grammatikas & Labrianidis, 2017). However, speaking to my informants it became apparent to me that the choice-necessity distinction is insufficient to draw absolute categorisations of migrants. Decisions to migrate or stay put can be both outcomes of choice and necessity at varying degrees at the same time (Fischer, Martin & Straubhaar, 1997; Van Hear, 1998). Tasos (33, London), clearly pointed to their often complementary role while reflecting on his decision to leave Greece. When we spoke, he was living in London already for a year working as an IT specialist in a company:

[...] I am only partly outside Greece because of need (anagkaiótita). Specifically, when I came here to work at the same time I had an offer in Greece, too. Simultaneously. So, I had to decide whether I will come to London or stay in Greece... And the offer from Greece was also a good offer: program manager in a good company with a good salary. So my decision to come to London was deliberate and depended on different reasons. First, it had to do with the mavrogenal situation in Greece, despite the fact that the company that offered me the job was doing well as it worked with the international market [...] Second, because I wanted to leave my comfort zone also in relation to the Greek culture. You need to test new waters, to understand who you are. You need to compare yourself to something. So, the reasons were personal and they related to a willingness for inner development. The fact that I have come here, provides me the opportunity to expand my horizons. But on the other half it [his decision] relates to “needs” considerations. Since I do not have a backup in Greece, I had to survive... and I was given the opportunity to do a job that is close to my interests for which I wouldn't be gasping to do [...]

Need and choice should not only be seen in relative terms, but also as subjectively defined; what may be experienced as a situation of absolute necessity for a person, pushing her to take a migration decision, may not be experienced as such by another. Drawing external etic categorisations of migrant motivations by juxtaposing choice and necessity in either/or terms may thus be simplistic. However, even if I had to reconsider the idea of analysing my data through this distinction, choice and need did single out as important concepts in the research process; not as externally imposed etic terms, but as emic terms used extensively by my research participants, such as by Tasos quoted above, to describe their experiences and aspirations and thus requiring explication.

As expected, several of my interview partners in Amsterdam and London, as well as several people that I met through my voluntary work in Amsterdam, described to me their migration as a rupture in their personal biography, an unwanted but necessary decision at a

⁵ For a comparative and more nuanced analysis focusing on Greeks, Italians and Spanish migrants in London see Pratsinakis, King, Leon Himmelstine, & Mazzilli, 2019.

time when they had given up all hope in Greece. However, there were at least as many emigrants who painted a completely different picture. When I explained to them the topic of my research, namely that I am exploring the new emigration from Greece that takes place during the crisis, they felt the need to dissociate themselves from what they described as the typical new Greek migrant: someone urgently fleeing the economic crisis in Greece. Assuming it was such experiences that I was looking to record and fearing that they may be not suitable respondents, they were telling me that for them it was not the need that pushed them out of Greece, and further explained that they always wanted to leave Greece, or that they had a job in Greece as well as a relatively job security before leaving. In the same light, others would tell me that they came to the UK or the Netherlands to follow their partners (see Pratsinakis, 2019) or close friends and that it was not a direct impact of the crisis in their personal life that shaped their decision making. Kostas (36, London) was a characteristic such a case. In his own words:

Some of my friends in Greece had already been living in Oxford and so I travelled to England three times in 2010, 2012 and 2014 to visit them. They are a couple, an English man and an Albanian woman that I met in Greece [...] My best friend and his wife are also here and they live in Southern England. So sometimes, we arranged to meet all together in Oxford. When I first visited Oxford, I travelled to London for 1-2 days to see the city. This was my first contact with London and England in general. The last time I visited the country, in March 2014, my friends from Oxford had moved and they were living in North London. At that time, I was in a strange situation, like I was looking for change. I thought the time was ripe for a thought I'd had in mind for years. It's not that I was unemployed in Greece. I was working as a Customer Service Representative at IKEA in Athens. I had been working there for 7 years and although it wasn't terrific, it was quite a good job if you consider the situation in Greece. A person wouldn't leave easily this job to emigrate, especially during the crisis. However, for several years I wanted to go and live abroad, see how life is outside Greece.

Kostas told me that his friends had been already half-jokingly telling him that he should go live with them. When they moved to London they had a spare room he could rent for an affordable price. He was single at this period. When he returned in Greece, he told me, he had already taken the decision to leave:

The truth is, I always wanted to work with children, I mean work in the education field. However, I didn't have the necessary qualifications to do something like that in Greece and I also couldn't attend courses to acquire such qualifications because of my working hours. And so I thought I would go to England to do something about it there, thinking I could combine work and studies more easily. This was the plan: to go to England and do something in the field of education.

Kostas resigned from IKEA and moved to his friend's house in London. He started working in a cafeteria and offered voluntary work in a community organisation working with children, where he was also later offered accommodation. His aim was to save money and improve his English and then follow a course which would allow him to become a teaching assistant.

Similar was the case of Nikos (35, Amsterdam) who had a position as civil servant in Athens from which he decided to resign to join his Serbian girlfriend and his best Greek friend in Amsterdam in 2016. Nikos, who had a degree in tourism, found very swiftly a job in a hotel and within a year's time he was promoted to work on a project in the financial department of the company owning the hotel. In a follow-up meeting several months later, Nikos told me he had applied and was accepted to study economics at a BA level at Nijmegen. Unlike Kostas, this was not something he had planned before migrating but rather an idea that grew on him while living and working in Amsterdam. Similar to Kostas, he told me that he always wanted to live outside Greece and was actively looking to do so three years before he actually emigrated. When I asked what changed in 2013 that made him put in practice an idea he always wanted to pursue, he told me:

Nikos: When I finished my studies, I had in mind to do an MA abroad and live outside Greece but due to the economic situation of my family I did not. In addition things were different in Greece in 2005, you could not imagine what was to follow... at least I couldn't. So, I did not manage to go abroad for economic reasons, while I did manage to find work in Greece and I was doing OK overall... and you know... you became complacent.

Manolis: So the crisis was an extra push?

Nikos: Exactly, I realised I had reached the limits of what I could achieve in Greece, there was no potential for advancement personal and in employment.

Even though respondents like Kostas and Nikos described their trajectories as rather exceptional, this seemed not to be the case given that I was often hearing stories akin to theirs. Later on I was able to test this observation by including two questions in the survey questionnaire. The first one was *'to what degree was your decision to emigrate something you have been wishing for?'* and the second one *'to what degree was your decision to emigrate enforced by the circumstances in Greece?'* People could answer those two questions by using a scale from one to ten. Forty-three percent of the sub sample of the post-2010 migrants (N=799) indicated that their decision was basically something they have been wishing for, while 27% indicated that it was more so enforced upon them due to the circumstances in Greece. The remaining people indicated that it was either a combination of both (22%) or none the two (8%). Even if differences were found to be less pronounced in London (38% wish and 34% need)⁶, the survey findings clearly show that the people who rejected the economic

⁶ The survey did not include people who were in the Netherlands or London for less than 6 months so it does not capture the view points and experiences of people who may have decided to return to Greece shortly after

crisis as the main motivation for their migration were certainly not a small minority, if not the majority among the post 2010-emigrants.

What does the fact that a significant segment of the so-called crisis-driven migrants present their migration not as a direct outcome of the economic crisis signify? One explanation could be that they downplay the importance of structural forces in shaping their emigration in an attempt to underline the element of agency in their decisions to migrate. Bygnes (2017) has recorded a similar reluctance to use the crisis trope as a reason to emigrate among highly skilled Spanish migrants in Norway who left Spain after 2008. She explains this reluctance as part of her informants' symbolic and social boundary work. According to Bygnes (2017:266-8), it is part and parcel of their attempt to dissociate themselves from negative stereotypical images about 'the poverty-stricken Spanish migrant' and to present themselves as resourceful agents, in contrast to the supposed desperate crisis-driven compatriot migrants.

However, even if some of my informants may have overstressed their agency in their decision to migrate, as most people do when asked to reflect on their choices, Bygnes' explanation is clearly insufficient to account for the case of Greek emigrants in London and Amsterdam. First, my data do not point to absolute distinctions between higher and lower skilled emigrants in terms of how they present their migration motivations⁷ and second, those who presented their migration as a matter of personal choice did not construct themselves as resourceful agents in opposition to a certain Greek migrant 'other'.

Most importantly, presentations of migration as involuntary were not framed by my informants in a negative manner and those who endorsed them were quite outspoken. There is a rather dominant public and media discourse in Greece, to which several of my informants made reference to, framing the new Greek emigrants as victims of corrupt politicians and years of failed policies (see Mavrodi & Moutselos, 2017; Pratsinakis et al., 2017). This framing further draws on historical legacies of Greece's often grievous past as an emigration country which are revived due to the country's dramatic crisis leading to the resurgence of mass emigration. It is within the rhetorical contours of this discourse that several of my informants presented their emigration as involuntary while, and in contrast to Bygnes' case study, expressing solidarity with other emigrants and voicing their anger about the political system and politics in Greece, and often at the EU too, which pushed them to emigrate. In short, both voluntary and involuntary migration decisions were presented as equally respectable by my informants.

Finally, having had the opportunity to meet several of my informants more than once and in different settings, I was convinced that their engagement with the notions of need and choice was not simply performative but a meaningful way for them to make sense of their

their emigration. One could argue that for the emigration of those people might have been less so something they wished for and more enforced by the circumstances in Greece. However, we do not have a measure of how big this group is and whether the previous assumption is indeed true so to know if and to what extent the survey may underrepresent people who have left Greece more as an outcome of the circumstances in the country.

⁷ It is true, however, that those with tertiary education more often presented their migration as a choice rather than an outcome of coercion when compared to those with lower education (49% and 33% respectively)

experiences and compare them to that of others. And if the presentation of emigration as a forced decision may be easily understood and explained in the context of the crisis, what do the reverse representations and experiences mean and what do they tell us about the resurgence of emigration from Greece during the crisis period? In the remainder of this working paper I focus in answering this question.

The changes in the emigration environment in Greece

My argument is that the large number of people who present their emigration from crisis-driven Greece as a materialisation of an earlier aspiration does not only affirm the self-selectivity of migration but also highlights a significant change that the *emigration environment* in Greece has undergone in the past few years. It was this change that allowed, triggered or gave an extra push to several people to leave Greece – people who wished to experience life abroad but would most probably have not done so otherwise.

Drawing on Carling's work (2002; 2014), with the term 'emigration environment' here I refer to the historical, sociocultural, economic, and political settings in a given locale, which encourages migration or not. This can be understood to have two dimensions: one that concerns the structural backdrop upon which emigration decisions take place, and a second one that concerns the ways that this structural reality is evaluated at the collective level and by individuals. As Carling (2014, p.3) rightly argues, 'a vital part of the emigration environment is the nature of migration as a socially constructed project. People who consider migration as an option relate to it through the meanings with which it is embedded'.

Someone does not feel the urge to emigrate because she is poor in absolutist terms or because she receives a salary that can be objectively defined as being low. Instead, it is because someone *feels* she is poor and importantly because she feels her poverty or her socioeconomic stagnation and/or downward mobility is place-bound. Migration decisions are thus taken with reference to both feelings of frustration and disappointment with conditions at home and related positive expectations about life abroad. And in crisis-driven Greece emigration emerged as a sensible strategy to pursue in order to better one's life.

Media paint a rather positive image of emigration, highlighting successful cases of Greek emigrants broad. This emphasis on positive examples may be read as an attempt to boost the wounded national sentiment, forming hence the other pole in an ambivalent presentation of emigration, which on the one hand laments the 'bleeding' of the nation, while, on the other, depicts it as an (easy) way out from a wrecked economy and a corrupt and inefficient state (Pratsinakis et al., 2017). This same discourse seems to permeate to a certain degree the everyday too. Natasha (33, London) emigrated before the crisis erupted in Greece initially to do a postdoctoral degree in the Netherlands and then to London for work. She told me that one of the most significant changes that she experienced while being abroad was the reversal of views of people back in Greece in relation to her decision to emigrate:

During the first three years, people used to say to me “oh, it is such a pity, you live so far away”, but the next three years the same people would say “you are far better abroad”. There was a high contrast in their reactions. It was outrageous. At first they couldn’t understand my decision to leave the country and I had to convince them I did what I thought was right for me and after that, I had to convince them that things are not the best when you live abroad. During the first period when I had a plain job in England and earned little money, people in Greece used to disapprove my life and judge me. I had to prove to them why I did what I did. On the contrary now, they tend to accept my life and think that it is the best thing to do. Now they say to me “Are you crazy you want to come back?”

As emigration was widely being discussed and indeed practiced equally widely, people were increasingly confronted with the dilemma if they should leave or stay. Georgia (30, London) left Athens in 2015 at a period when her business, a tapas bar (ouzeri) she had opened in Athens after investing years of work, was going through very hard times again after a period when things had started to look more positive. At the time, she had lost hope she could lead a stable life and progress in Greece. She told me:

The first thing I thought when I decided to leave Greece was that only once I will be 30 years old. I will never be 30 years old again, at least not in this life. The current crisis happened when I was 26 ...if it stops when I am 40... What will I do then? And what I would not want for myself is to reach a certain age and regret for not having taken the step... to say to myself that “you should have done it.” So, what’s my life’s purpose? Do nothing?

For Giorgia, the dilemma of staying or leaving in the context of the crisis appeared pressing in relation to life course considerations. Emigration was thought as something she needed to urgently put in practice to avoid socioeconomic stagnation. For others, the fact the emigration gradually became a reality that concerned a significant number of people had in itself an impact on how they took migration decisions. Mihalis (32, London), for instance described to me how he decided to emigrate at a period when many of his friends and fellow students in the University (he had studied civil engineering) were leaving. The emigration of a friend of his who had a pretty good salary given the circumstances in Greece but decided to emigrate together with his girlfriend regardless, had a considerable on him:

Mihalis: It is when he left that I started seriously thinking about it... He went to Denmark and he was really satisfied... He was someone who strongly wanted to migrate of course... In fact, I have many other friends and acquaintances that left [...]

Manolis: So the fact that many people were leaving made you also consider emigrating?

Mihalīs: Yes. I think this applies to everyone. When you see that most of the people you know are leaving the country then you take the decision to leave more easily... Maybe ten years before the situation was different. For example, possibly when you would try to leave things behind, people might have tried to stop you. However now people even encourage you to leave, "leave the country, there is nothing you can do here anyhow" they say...

Transnational networks

Equally important is the role played by the new transnational networks that have developed due to the presence of the crisis migrants in various countries and cities, primarily in the EU, through a self-feeding process that leads to further migration. As Massey et al. (1993, p.443) note, each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movement more likely, as new migrants reduce the costs of subsequent migration for a set of friends and relatives. People will migrate if they perceive better opportunities elsewhere but also have the capabilities to move. This assertion, de Hass (2011, p.16) argues, implies choice and agency, but also shows that this agency is constrained by conditions which create concrete opportunity structures.

According to the EUMIGRE survey data, a majority (60%) of the recent migrants have helped newcomers by either hosting them at their place of residence in their early days abroad or helping them find a job. In addition, several of my informants have traveled abroad to visit friends before making the step. Flows of information about life there may have been in fact very crucial conditions shaping migration decisions as have been seen in the cases of Kostas and Nikos cited above. Nikos in particular told me he had been visiting Amsterdam six times a year in the period contemplating migration and was rather well-prepared when he finally took the step. He was about to make the move earlier but at that time his friend was thinking of leaving Amsterdam. Similarly, Sonia (27, Amsterdam), a pastry cook, explained to me that the main reason she came to Holland was because she had a friend living there. That friend of hers was about to return so she took 'the opportunity to move', as she told me.

The loosening of social constraints

In 1981 Kubat and Hoffmann-Nowotny published an article that regrettably did not receive much attention. In this article they inverted an underlying assumption in most migration theories, namely the belief that people are essentially sedentary and that they need external stimuli to move. Claiming that people are mobile by nature, as they did, meant subscribing to yet another essentialism. However, despite the crudeness of their argument, or possibly

because of its crudeness, they were able to convincingly deconstruct the belief that people are free agents, and most importantly to highlight that individual migrants decide whether or not to move within social and discursive constraints. As highlighted in a number of quotations above, a significant change that the emigration environment in Greece underwent in Greece in the past few years relates to how kin and friends reacted to decisions of friends and relatives to leave. This is also corroborated by the survey findings. According to the EUMIGRE survey, for the majority of the post-2010 migrants, their social circle was supportive of their decision to emigrate (61%). It was only for a small minority (10%) of respondents whose social circle was negative towards their decision to migrate⁸, and out of this minority more than two out of three changed their view through time in favour of the respondents' decision. The majority of my interview partners also described how their parents were supportive of their decision to leave.

People are embedded in webs of social relations. Taking the step to emigrate is a decision that does not only influence the migrant herself but also other people with whom she is invested in reciprocal relations. The departure of one or more individuals utterly reshapes this web of social relations and its internal arrangements and dynamics. In that sense, migration decisions are decisions that have a strong moral dimension. Often this moral dimension is perceived to concern one's obligation towards the national community and in this framing, decisions to leave may be seen as escapist or even treasonous (see Genova, 2019). Much more concrete are the dilemmas that migrants face towards 'their close people'; the more one is embedded and invested in relations of solidarity and strong psychological and social dependency, the more weighty it is for her to emigrate.

That concerns particularly family relations, and especially in Greece where they have remained closely knit often characterised by mutual socioeconomic dependency and a culture of intergenerational solidarity that has historically substituted for the lack of provisions from a traditionally weak Greek welfare state. Along with its functions as provider of childcare, the family in Greece, and in Southern Europe more broadly, is the main locus of support, with both a social role and a productive role (Ferrera, 1996; Karamessini, 2007). The former role is pursued through the provision of care, emotional support and financial transfers for the needy and vulnerable members, such as the unemployed, the elderly and the chronically ill. The latter through the creation of family businesses, which have flourished in Greece.

The Greek family is also characterised by a child-centred mentality (Maratou – Alibranti, 1999, p.61) which augmented from the 1990s onward when the family emerged as a prime 'social shock absorber' against relatively high youth unemployment and protracted school-to-work transition (Karamessini, 2007; Karamessini, 2010). Parents provide support through extended co-residence with their adult children, financial support of their education and training, and a strong commitment to secure them stable employment. In this attempt they often mobilised clientelistic networks and family loyalties related to patron-client hierarchies to provide them access to public sector jobs. Others, in a similarly paternalistic mentality,

⁸ The social circle of the remaining of the respondents was neutral (29%).

expected their children to follow their profession, if self-employed, or to take over the family business if they had one.

Once public sector employment became no longer an option as a result of cuts and restrictions in new recruitments, and while several professional and employment sectors collapsed and small scale family business found it extremely difficult to remain economically viable during the crisis, many Greek parents found it increasingly difficult to offer to their children access to any employment or to employment that their children would wish to take up (Christoforou, Makadasi, Pierrakakis & Tsakloglou, 2018). Indicatively, it is noted that in 2013 approximately 27% of people aged 18-29 lived in households below the poverty level (Matsaganis, 2015). As a result, children became much more open to take risks to avoid socioeconomic stagnation by emigrating. In this endeavour, they often embarked in an attempt to pursue their dream career or a goal they had long given up (see Pratsinakis et al., 2019). On their side, the parents, partly as a result of their inability to provide access to good jobs to their children and partly due to a general deep-felt disappointment for what is widely perceived to be a grim future for younger generations in Greece, they became more favourable towards the emigration of their children even if that would, regrettably for them, entail physically separating from them⁹.

Xenitiá and the new migration

Greece has a long emigration history which, as mentioned, has left a strong and lasting imprint in the country's culture. The experience of absence from one's homeland is culturally elaborated in Greek under the concept *xenitiá*, literally meaning exile. This concept describes an emotional state which revolves around poignant feelings of nostalgia and loss and as such is associated both with those who stay and those who leave. It is a state of longing for the sojourners, particularly those whose absence is not entirely voluntary, by those who stay, and a condition of estrangement by those who leave related to feelings of discrimination and a longing for home (Danforth, 1982; Seremetakis, 1991; Sultan, 1994). The notion of *xenitiá* is also coupled with a strong ethos of return and a belief that one belonged in Greece and should one day return there (Peek, 2008).

The concept of *xenitiá* is central in many cultural and artistic manifestations notably in literature and music (Pappas, 1994; Kindinger, 2015). Restricting our focus to music alone, there is a deep tradition of lamenting the woes of *xenitiá* starting from traditional folk music, to the urban folk music, *rebétika* (focusing on the transatlantic emigration of the early 20th century) to the more recent popular folk music, *Laiká* (focusing on the postwar guestworkers' emigration to Western Europe), exemplified in the songs by late popular Greek singer Kazantzidis.

⁹ The extensive emigration of young adults raises questions on how care for the elderly and the children will and is being managed in transnational space by Greek families with migrant children.

One could not argue that xenitiá is an obsolete concept in present day Greece. As already mentioned, past legacies have directly and indirectly shaped several media presentation of the new emigration and are used by some of my informants as a frame to assess their migration experiences. Yet its centrality in describing migration experiences of stayers and leavers has critically lessened. Obviously, the technological advancements in communication media and the reduction of costs of travelling have played a significant role. Keeping frequent contact with people back home is much easier and affordable now than it was for earlier generations of migrants. In addition, global master narratives according to which mobility is praised as a way to upgrade one's socioeconomic position may have also contributed in imputing a more positive framing to migration especially when it concerns the highly skilled.

Importantly, the disillusionment from institutions and the political system and a lack of faith about a possibility for a bright future in Greece, often coupled with a disapproval of a certain mentality of doing things in Greece, all contribute in making migration discussed more positively. That is especially the case when migration takes place in the context of free mobility within the European Union, due to physical proximity and the ability that this affords, especially among the more well of migrants, to often travel to Greece. Emigration to more distant destinations makes feelings of alienation and rupture stronger. Indicatively, a mother of friend of mine, whom I am met in one of my trips in Greece, was telling me that when her son emigrated to China to work as a university lecturer, she was crying and singing songs of xenitiá in the mornings in the first days after his departure. 'I got very sad even if I had encouraged him to go', she told me. This sadness was related to both poignant feelings of loss and anger against politicians.

When we were at the airport, the day Periklis [her son] was leaving, I saw Paschalides who was formerly a Minister of Education. I ran to towards him, I wanted to shout at him 'you doomed the future of our children'. Periklis prevented me. He told me, you know what he will tell you, you should be proud that your son is going to a good University and he is progressing.

Contrary to my friend's mother, the mother of one of my interview participants in London expressed her frustration about her friends in Athens who found it appropriate to express their compassion that her children were abroad. She said she was very happy about her children's opportunities, which was the vast attitude for the majority of the parents according to my research participants in the UK and the Netherlands.

Conclusion

In the context of the debt crisis, recession, austerity and their socio-political consequences, Greece is experiencing a new major wave of out-migration. Outflows seem to be correlated

with rising unemployment rates and be inversely correlated to the average disposable income in Greece which shrunk in the past few years. However, it would be to commit an 'ecological fallacy' to confound macro-level migration determinants with individual migration motives – as push-pull migration theories typically do. Any macro-model should be underpinned by a credible micro-behavioural link that takes into account peoples' agency, aspirations and resources to materialise those (de Haas, 2011).

My data show that lack of a job and/or marginal socioeconomic conditions are indeed pushing several people out of Greece. Those people describe their migration as a severe rupture in their personal biography and highlight the centrality of the crisis in shaping rather abrupt and unwanted migration decisions. However, there is another group of people, possibly more sizeable, leaving Greece in a much less pressing need. Those people present their migration as something they were considering already long ago. Focusing on this category of migrants, I have here outlined that for them the economic crisis may have not had direct impact in shaping their decision to emigrate, but it was critically important in reshaping the wider socioeconomic dynamics that allowed or triggered their decision to leave Greece. Thus, except from highlighting that migration is a selective process, their emigration hints of the drastically changed emigration environment in Greece. By altering everyday discourse on emigration and loosening up social constraints towards long distance mobility, the crisis has made emigration an option to be widely considered. At same time, the presence of new migrants abroad induces and facilitates further migration through the workings of transnational networks in a self-feeding process.

These processes highlight the paramount significance of the social in migration decisions and indicate that emigration may be expected to continue in the years to come, irrespective of the developments in terms of the Greek economy's performance; especially for those who seem to have the most opportunities in the labour markets of more advanced economies.

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The Greek Diaspora Project at SEESOX

Mission statement

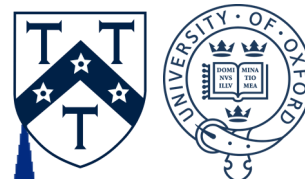
The Greek Diaspora Project (GDP) was set up at SEESOX with the overall aim to serve as a nexus between academic research and policy, and to help identify ideas to maximise the developmental impact of the Greek diaspora on contemporary Greek politics, economy and society. The project studies the relationship between Greece and its diaspora within the context of the current economic crisis and beyond.

Project objectives

- Become the preeminent forum for debate between the wider diaspora scholarship and scholarship dedicated to the Greek diaspora;
- Relate Greece and its diaspora to other similar countries and conduct in-depth comparative studies;
- Be a port of call for anyone interested in contemporary aspects of the Greek diaspora, in terms of its library and archival resources, activities, institutional affiliations, policy relevant research;
- Analyse the new trends characterizing the current Greek diaspora in conjunction to the historical context, socio-economic change, varieties of cultural affinities;
- Assess the developmental impact of the diaspora on the Greek economy and identify policies that can maximize its contribution;
- Inform Greek public debate and Greek policy makers on the Greek diaspora, its evolution and the policy implications of actual and potential interactions between the diaspora and Greece;
- Secure funding and research opportunities for a young generation of scholars dedicated to the study of the Greek diaspora.

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South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX) is part of the European Studies Centre (ESC) at St Antony's College, Oxford. It focuses on the interdisciplinary study of the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. Drawing on the academic excellence of the University and an international network of associates, it conducts academic and policy relevant research on the current multifaceted transformations of the region. It follows closely regional phenomena and analyses the historical and intellectual influences which have shaped perceptions and actions in the region. In Oxford's best tradition, the SEESOX team is committed to understanding the present through the *longue durée* and reflecting on the future through high quality scholarship.



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