

Where Do We Go From Here? Building Understanding in Europe's Migrant Gateway

At Issue

On January 1st, 2011, the Greek government announced that it planned on building a fence along an eight-mile stretch of border between Greece and Turkey to keep out illegal immigrants. "Greek society has reached its limits in taking in illegal immigrants," Christos Papoutsis told reporters during the announcement. "Greece can't take it anymore."

Greece, a country of approximately 11 million, has an estimated one million undocumented immigrants and that number is growing exponentially. Indeed, it has become the gateway for migrants entering Europe - now accounting for 90 percent of the European Union's detected illegal border crossings, compared to 75 percent in 2009. Greek border authorities reported nearly 50,000 border crossings in the first half of 2010, with most of the rise in crossings occurring on the northeastern border with Turkey.

It is estimated that over 20,000 of those crossing into Greece last year were Afghans fleeing war and violence¹ - a complicating factor blurring the line between "illegal immigrant" and "asylum-seeker," deserving of protected status (Greece accepts the fewest amount asylum-seekers on the continent). In the past, most undocumented migrants came from Albania but they are now increasingly coming from Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, with the aid of smugglers who work freely in Turkey, ferrying migrants from the war zones on or near its borders for a hefty price. The building of the fence along rugged border is a sign that Greece believes that even this increase in manpower will likely be futile in stopping a problem whose roots lay with distant wars and conflicts that have pushed parts of humanity to the brink. Both the Greek government and Greeks themselves increasingly believe that tough measures need to be taken to stem the flow.

Indeed, all over Europe, the sharp rise in undocumented migrants, coupled recently with an economic downturn, has led to a backlash that has fuelled the rise of xenophobic right-wing parties and violence against immigrants - both those living in the country and those who are looking to enter. Greece has been no exception. Violence against immigrants is growing² to worrying levels. Attacks on immigrants in Greece's cities are often committed by young people who have been influenced by hysterical media reports - reports that fuel misunderstanding and intolerance.³ Placards reading "Foreigners mean crime" are popping up at the near weekly protests around Greece, and Greek police have been accused as standing idly by while violence against immigrants has occurred. In addition, Greek attitudes towards further immigration into their country have toughened, as witnessed by the thousands of migrants kept in ramshackle detention centers near the Turkish and Albanian borders.

Greece, historically a country of mass emigration, has become one of the world's largest recipients of immigrants. With war and instability nearby, and a failure to control its borders, this is unlikely to change in the near future. Greece now must face building a tolerant, multicultural society that embraces diversity and provides for those in need.

The Project

Our project comes during a period of economic upheaval in Greece, as well as during the climax of the country's immigration debate - both issues being intimately linked. The Greek government's decision to construct a fence along its border, along with a recent move to deport thousands of undocumented migrants living in Greece, shows the hardening attitude of Greeks toward this issue - as do the increasing violent attacks against immigrants. Skyrocketing unemployment in the country has also evoked nativist attitudes that are encouraged by the local news media. It is the objective of this project to help roll back this sentiment and add informed and civilized dialogue to the debate.

Our project would consist of two distinct phases both aimed at building awareness and understanding about Greece's current immigrant situation, focusing in particular on recent immigrants from conflict zones. The phases are: (a) Reporting and documenting (b) Exhibiting and publishing our findings. The former would require four weeks to report on the situation, building our knowledge while collecting

¹ See *Time* article: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2040821,00.html>

² See *NY Times* article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/01/world/europe/01greece.html?pagewanted=all>

³ See Harvard Nieman report: <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/102217/Immigrants-Ignite-a-Media-Maelstrom-in-Greece.aspx>

reportage, conducting interviews and filming. The latter would see us publish a series on migrants in Greece (focusing on those from war torn nations like Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia) in the *Greek Reporter* (greekreporter.com), a lively and growing webzine that produces excellent coverage on issues in the region to an audience of nearly 150,000 people. The second phase would also see us exhibit our work both in Athens and within the large Greek community in Toronto.

Timeline

Week 1-4 (Early June to early July) The first month will be spent reporting, filming and documenting Greece's northeastern border with Turkey, the immigrant detention center in near Orestiada, as well as immigrant "ghettos" in Greece's two main cities: Athens and Thessaloniki. We will also conduct interviews with officials and human rights stakeholders. Our connections with the *Greek Reporter* website, The Greek Council for Refugees and potentially other non-profit groups will allow us access to these places and people.

Week 4-6 (Early July to late July) Compiling information and writing articles on migrants and related issues for the *Greek Reporter* website. During this period, we would begin setting up our exhibit on the same topic: developing photos, creating written materials and editing video.

Week 6-8 (late July) Exhibit our materials in a gallery space in central Athens. The display would include written materials, video testimonies and photography. Our exhibition, entitled "Where Do We Go From Here?", would focus on attracting local youth who have become increasingly attracted to xenophobic right-wing groups. Mr. Kenneth Hansen, who runs The Greek Council for Refugees -the largest human rights group in Greece -, will open the exhibit and use the organization's resources to attract patrons.

Week 9 (late August) Finally, our exhibit would be presented in Toronto, Canada - our hometown and home to the third largest Greek population outside of Greece. The exhibition would be held at *Lolita's*, a restaurant and art space in Greektown, Toronto.

Project Designers

Alexander Besant is a resident at International House in New York and a student at Columbia University School of Journalism. He is interested in matters on migration and diversity, particularly the way in which mass migration to Western countries is shaping their future. Alex has experience working in human rights through an internship with Human Rights Watch; a former position with the Mission of Canada to the United Nations in the human rights department; and, he founded an NGO in 2009 to build awareness about the dreadful state of freedom of expression in Eritrea. He also has a Master's in International Affairs from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (University of Geneva). **Theo Kiriopoulos** is a recent film graduate at Ryerson University, Canada's most prestigious film and media school. Born in Crete, he is fluent in Greek and is deeply familiar with Greece and its culture.

Goals, Outcome and Future Impact

Peace is not simply the absence of war. Nor is it simply a grudging tolerance of the other - an agreement to disagree. Rather, peace is an enduring sentiment of the equal worth of every human being. It is also a day-to-day commitment to understanding, compromise and compassion. This is a turning point in both Greek and European history, and the policies, as well as attitudes, towards immigrants that are being implemented and developed now will have enduring consequences. Though our project is a small undertaking in the pursuit of peace, it will help shed light and increase awareness about an issue that is currently clouded by political sophistry, exaggeration, and falsehoods. It will also raise awareness among Greeks (who typically only see the negative consequences of immigration) regarding the plight of those who are desperately seeking refuge in their country. Given that roughly 25% of Greeks live outside of Greece, particularly in the US, UK, Canada and Australia, reaching them through *The Greek Reporter* and during our exhibit in Toronto, is essential. Lastly, through our reporting, we hope to create a lasting record of the current situation in Greece and hope that it will be used to inform future generations of both Greeks and all Europeans.