



Report on Bulgarian Immigrants in Greece



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Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Methodology.....	3
3. History	5
4. Social characteristics of Bulgarian immigrants	8
5. Bulgarian immigrants and the Greek labour market.....	13
6. Relations of Bulgarian immigrants with Greeks and with other immigrants ...	16
7. Organisations of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece	18
8. Participation of Bulgarian immigrants in political life and democratic institutions.....	28
9. Conclusions.....	34
10. Bibliography	38
Annex I – Organisations of Bulgarian Immigrants in Greece	42
Annex II – Field Research Questionnaire.....	44

1. Introduction

Up until the 1980s, Greece was a country that, traditionally, “exported” immigrants. After the collapse of social realism, the country became a destination for massive numbers of immigrants, mainly from countries of the former Soviet bloc. Thus, rapidly and with no immigrant policy, Greece became, over the course of the last twenty years, a country welcoming immigrants.

The presence of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece began being noticeable immediately after the fall of the regime in Bulgaria (1989) and escalated around 1997-98¹. A second major wave of Bulgarian immigrants was recorded around 2001², while the third and final wave was recorded during the 2007-09 period³. The massive and long-term presence of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece was the main reason for the focus of this research on the Bulgarian community, since Bulgaria has, along with Romania, been a full Member State of the European Union since 2007 and, consequently, its citizens are now considered “EU citizens”, entitled to freedom of movement and establishment and equal access to economic and social rights in other EU Member States. In this study, conducted within the framework of the programme “Access to Rights and Civil Dialogue for All”, which is co-financed by the EU and aims at investigating and supporting the exercise of political and social rights of EU immigrants (i.e. nationals of one EU Member State living as immigrants in a different EU Member State) resident in five EU countries, we wanted to study to what extent the Bulgarian immigrants living in Greece feel equal to European citizens, to record their social characteristics, the extent of their social inclusion, their position in the labour market, the extent of their participation in the country’s political life and democratic institutions, as well as the level and manner of their representation by the existing organisations of the Bulgarian community.

¹The first institutional endeavour for the legalization of illegal immigrants in Greece took place during that period.

² Second legalization of illegal immigrants in Greece.

³ On 1 January 2007, Bulgaria became a full member of the EU; however, exceptions were in place until 1 January 2009 in regard to the free movement of persons from the new EU members, i.e. Bulgaria and Romania, to a number of countries, including Greece.

2. Methodology

Methodologically, this report was based, initially, on a review of the existing bibliography and the statistical data available; it is also based to a great extent on field research findings. For the purposes of this research, the Organisations of Bulgarian community in Greece, as well as the newspapers published in Athens that address Bulgarian immigrants, were identified. The field research began with interviews of representatives of organisations of Bulgarian immigrants and with the editors⁴ of two newspapers addressing Bulgarian immigrants in Greece.

Due to restrictions that concern the scope and resources for this research, the field research sample only includes Bulgarian immigrants living in Athens, although this does not negate the representativeness of the sample and the validity of the results, as approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population of Bulgarian immigrants living in Greece reside in Athens.

Within the framework of the field research, over 50 personal interviews were held, using a semi-structured questionnaire. Of these, 19 interviews were conducted with Bulgarian immigrants who have participated in any level of the Greek education system and 32 with Bulgarian immigrants who have had no contact whatsoever with the Greek education system. The first group included persons from both first and second generation of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece. By first generation, we mean immigrants who came from Bulgaria to Greece in order to study or seek employment and who subsequently remained permanently or for long periods of time in Greece, while by second generation, we mean the children of immigrants that were born in Greece, as well as children that were not born in Greece but came to Greece at an early age to live with their parents, who had migrated and settled earlier in Greece.

The sample of the second group (Bulgarian immigrants who never participated in the Greek education system) mainly included working women employed in domestic labour, as they are one of the largest, if not the largest, population group of

⁴ Efforts were made to secure interviews with representatives of the other two newspapers addressing Bulgarian immigrants living in Greece, but they did not respond to the invitation of the research team.

Bulgarians living in Attica and in the country, in general. Interviews with this group were not open (as was the case with representatives of organisations and immigrant newspapers), but were carried out using a semi-structured questionnaire (available in an Annex to this report), in order to facilitate the comparative analysis of responses. The sample also includes interviews with immigrants working at recruitment agencies, as well as open interviews with Bulgarian immigrants who stood as candidates with Greek political parties during two elections in Greece, the 2009 Euro-elections and the 2010 local government elections. We also met with employees of tourism agencies organizing bus trips between Athens and Sofia, as most Bulgarian immigrants travel to and from Bulgaria by bus.

On 7 July 2011, a group discussion was held with a focus group of Bulgarian immigrants living in Greece and representatives of an organisation of Bulgarian immigrants. The agenda of this discussion included issues concerning the position of Bulgarian immigrants in Greek society and the Greek labour market, as well as their participation in the democratic processes of the country.

3. History

After the fall of the Communist regime (November 1989), Bulgaria became a country that exported workers to the United States of America, to Canada and to European countries. As was often the case during that period, Bulgaria faced the financial crisis of the transitional period and the rapid increase in unemployment and inflation, but Bulgarian citizens were given the right to freely exit the country for the first time. During that period, Germany proved to be the most attractive country for Bulgarians (welcoming 20.6% of the total exported population of Bulgarian immigrants), followed by the United States (with 12.6% of the then Bulgarian immigrants) and Canada (with 8.2%)⁵. These three countries had historically significant experience as countries receiving immigrants and have an organized migration policy. It is quite hard for an immigrant to enter these countries and their institutional framework and control mechanisms make illegal residence and labour even harder.

One of the first – and relatively easy to access and “cheaper” – destinations for Bulgarian immigrants was Greece, which then welcomed 7.1% of the total population of Bulgarian immigrants. The main reason for this preference was the shorter distance in comparison to other destinations; consequently, transport expenses are much lower and the safety of return is much higher, an important fact in cases of immigrants who left underage children and family behind.

The first mass entry of Bulgarian immigrants into Greece took place illegally, through tourism agencies. Bulgarian “tourists” would enter Greece legally, mainly with group visas and pre-paid tourist packages and the buses would return half-empty, as the “tourists” remained in Greece. Thus, there were already 7,000 Bulgarians⁶ in Greece in 1993, with a steady trend of continued influx.

⁵ Data from the Bulgarian Statistical Service, 1994. See also Markova, E., *The Economic Performance of Bulgarian illegal and legalized immigrants in the Greek Labor market*, PhD thesis, Dep. Of Economics, Univ. of Athens, 2001, p. 246, as well as The World Bank, Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011, (<http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTDECPROSPECTS/0,,contentMDK:21352016~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:476883.00.html>)

⁶ There are no accurate data in Greece in regard to the actual number of aliens living in the country. According to the then official data of the Greek Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED),

A massive wave of influx of Bulgarians was observed a few years later, around 1997-98⁷, when Greece legalized – on the condition that specific conditions were met – for the first time the individuals illegally residing in its territory through a law that was adopted in November 1997 and entered into force on 1 January 1998. The period of public consultation of that legislation and, subsequently, the period between the adoption of the Law and its entry into force, were adequate for future Bulgarian immigrants to receive information and encouragement to enter the country from friends and acquaintances already working in Greece. Furthermore, this period coincided with the Bulgarian banking crash (1996-97), in which millions of Bulgarians lost their deposits⁸. A third reason for this massive wave of influx was that during that period, Bulgaria signed a loan contract with the International Monetary Fund meant to “save” the country, through which the government privatized numerous enterprises, leading to a massive increase in unemployment.

The second wave of influx of Bulgarian immigrants was observed during the period of the second endeavour to legalise persons illegally residing in Greece, in 2001. According to the official census of that year⁹, there were approximately 35,000 Bulgarians¹⁰ in Greece. On the basis of these statistical data, Bulgarians represented the second largest nationality of immigrants in Greece after Albanians, even with a great difference in numbers: 55.67% of all immigrants were Albanians, while 4.67% were Bulgarians.

1,062 Bulgarians have acquired a Green card; this number in no way reflects the actual number of Bulgarians then living in the country. For related numbers, see Markova, E., *ibid*.

⁷ For numbers during that period, see Kavounidis, T., *Characteristics of immigrants: the Greek legalization programme of 1998*, Sakkoulas publications, Athens-Thessaloniki 2002, p. 349.

⁸ In the year 1996, inflation in Bulgaria was approximately 600%. It is indicatively mentioned that during this period, the monthly salary of e.g. a civil engineer in Bulgaria with 30 years of experience was approximately 10 USD, i.e. approximately half of the daily wages of an unskilled cleaner in Greece.

⁹ The results of the 2001 census were disputed in regard to the number of immigrants living in Greece, since, according to other estimates, Bulgarians – and other immigrants – were double in number than those that finally arrived / agreed to participate in the census.

¹⁰ See EL.STAT., 2001 Census (http://www.statistics.gr/portal/page/portal/ESYE/PAGE-themes?p_param=A1602&r_param=SAM07&y_param=2001_00&mytabs=0), as well as Pavlou, Miltos, “Greece of Migration in numbers”, in Pavlou, M. & D. Christopoulos (Ed.), *Greece of Migration: Social participation, rights and citizenship*, KRITIKI publishing, Athens 2004, and Tzortzopoulou, M., M. Stoyanova, “Immigration in Greece: Issues and approaches to the study of the phenomenon” in Kallas, J. (ed.), *The Node for Secondary Processing*, EKKE publishing, Athens 2005, p. 171-181.

The third and final, to date, massive wave was recorded during the period of accession of Bulgaria to the EU. According to data of the Ministry of the Interior, during the 2007-2009 period, 132,935 residence and labour permits were issued to Bulgarian and Romanian citizens in Greece (as compared to 314,460 to Albanians)¹¹. Based on this fact, one could reasonably estimate that Bulgarian immigrants legally residing in Greece during that period numbered approximately 77,000, while their total number (including those without an official residence permit) must have been double that number, i.e. approximately 150,000 persons.

Today, in 2011, unofficial estimates, lacking data recording Bulgarian citizens as immigrants from third countries, put the total number of Bulgarians residing in Greece at over 150,000 persons¹².

¹¹ See also Kontiadis, X. & Th. Papatheodorou, *The reform of migration policy*, Papazissis publishing, Athens 2007, p. 195-200.

¹² The data of the 2011 population census will be published during the second half of 2012.

4. Social characteristics of Bulgarian immigrants¹³

GENDER

From the very start of the Bulgarian migration wave, the migration of Bulgarians to Greece was female in gender. Coming from Bulgaria, it was harder for men to find work than women. Construction and farming work were already dominated since the mid-90s by Albanian immigrants, who had entered and settled in Greece in massive numbers in the early 90s. The supply of labour for elderly or child care in Greece had not been covered and Bulgarian immigrant women easily found employment in these sectors. Thus, after 20 years, migration from Bulgaria gradually transformed into “female” migration¹⁴.

AGE

The majority of Bulgarian female immigrants in Greece are among 40 and 60 years of age, of whom a large percentage are divorced or widowed women who have left underage children and/or elderly parents behind. Male immigrants in Greece are younger in age (most between 25 and 45 years of age) and the majority of such immigrants are in Greece with their wives and children.

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

Most Bulgarian immigrants in Greece – men and women – are usually graduates of secondary or technical schools, while a small percentage hold higher education degrees.

RESIDENCE

The majority of Bulgarian immigrants have settled in the large urban centres of Greece. It is estimated that approximately 30% of the total population are located in Athens and nearby areas. There are also relatively large numbers of Bulgarian

¹³ The conclusions of this section are mainly based on the related bibliography (see Kavounidis, T., *ibid*; Markova, *ibid*; 2001 Census, *ibid*; Markova, E. “The presence of Bulgarian immigrants in the Greek labour market and Greek society” in Marvakis, Ath. & D. Parsanoglou, M. Pavlou (ed.), *Immigrants in Greece*, Ellinika Grammata publishing, Athens 2001, p. 247-276; Tzortzopoulou, M., M. Stoyanova, *ibid*), and the field research conducted particularly in regard to developments after 2007.

¹⁴ However, there are indications in recent years regarding the presence of younger Bulgarian male immigrants in Greece.

immigrants in the areas of Thessaloniki, Crete, Messenia and Laconia. With regard to Athens, in particular, their spatial concentration matches that of immigrants in general, i.e. most live in the districts of Metaxourgion, Vathis Square, Kypseli and along Acharnon Street.

VOCATIONAL STATUS

In Greece, as is the case in other Mediterranean countries of the EU, where unemployment has structural characteristics to a great extent, the high unemployment rates often – and particularly before the recent economic crisis – co-exist with a large number of vacant positions of a mainly manual nature or "low status". In researching the vocational status of Bulgarians, we examined their employment system and their position in the labour market, as well as their occupation before migrating to Greece¹⁵.

We identified differences between immigrants settling in Greece with long-term prospects and those migrating with short-term prospects. In the category of immigrants¹⁶ who came to Greece with long-term prospects of residence, there are great changes in comparison to their previous vocational status in Bulgaria. Whereas in Bulgaria they worked as skilled employees or workers in the public or private sector¹⁷, in Greece they were employed as unskilled personnel, in most cases at the private premises of their employer. It should be noted that a gradual change in the vocational status of a large percentage of Bulgarians with long-term residence in Greece is being observed. Through learning the Greek language, recognizing officially their degrees and other qualifications, and primarily, as the immigrants themselves attest, through becoming legalized residents of Greece, they acquire the necessary qualifications to enter the labour market on a relatively equal basis and seek positions of better quality. Thus, several female immigrants who initially worked in domestic labour are currently employed, after acquiring residence and

¹⁵ We tried to comparatively examine the vocational status of Bulgarians in Greece in relation to their homeland, not simply to record data, but in an effort to better understand the quality of their adaptation to Greece.

¹⁶ 1997-98 influx wave. Essentially, these are female immigrants who, when arriving in Greece, were employed in domestic work, mainly providing care to the elderly.

¹⁷ Female immigrants who came to Greece before 1997 had almost exclusively Bulgarian public sector experience.

work permit, as skilled employees in smaller or larger firms, particularly in the service sector.

In relation to Bulgarian immigrants coming to Greece with relatively short-term prospects of residence, there is smaller change in comparison to their employment status in Bulgaria. Most were employed in the private sector and, upon coming to Greece, found positions as unskilled or skilled labour, similar to those they held in Bulgaria. In the last 4-5 years, there is a relative increase in the number of self-employed Bulgarian immigrants, mainly in the food trade and transportation sectors.

DURATION OF RESIDENCE IN GREECE

From the responses of the sample of persons interviewed, the average duration of residence of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece is recorded as approximately 10 years. Most usually reside in Greece for numerous years, but segmentally, i.e. they work for some years (or even months) in Greece and then return to Bulgaria for various family obligations (“*to take care of my mother who suffered a stroke*”, “*to attend my father’s funeral and settle his affairs*”, “*to organize my son’s ball*”, “*to organize my daughter’s wedding*”) before returning once more to Greece after a few months or, at most, after a year.

This mobility was initially made feasible after two cycles (1998 and 2001) of legalization of illegal immigrants in Greece, but mainly after the accession of Bulgaria to the EU (2007) and particularly after the two-year transitional period, i.e. after 2009. The nature of the work of many Bulgarian immigrants in Greece also plays an important role. On the one hand, the majority of female immigrants are employed in the elderly care sector, where there is frequent employer turnover, and on the other hand, a large number of male immigrants are employed in seasonal-type work.

MIGRATION INCENTIVES

Previous sections presented demographic characteristics, while this section presents factors that preceded the migration process, i.e. the incentives that led to the decision of Bulgarians to migrate to Greece.

The overwhelming majority of participants in the field research cite either general economic / labour reasons (“*to find work*”, “*the overall family income was not enough to secure the bare necessities*”, “*to make more money*”) or other, more specific but still financial reasons (“*to secure my children’s education*”, “*to pay off our debts*”, “*to buy our own house*”). The incentive of personal growth was only cited by Bulgarian immigrants who had graduated from Greek universities. Pupils or graduates of Greek secondary school cite reasons of family reunion (“*my mother was here and was no longer working as a domestic worker*”, “*when I reached school age, my parents took me here with them*”).

The research also showed that in most cases, the decision to migrate to Greece is not a personal matter. Several immigrants cite a conscious decision by the entire family, i.e. the reasons are voluntary, but also include a degree of necessity (“*either my husband or I had to come. Who would take care of the children?*” “*Who else could have come? My elderly parents? They had to take care of my child*”). Thus, usually one family member came to Greece and was responsible for covering the financial obligations of those who remained in Bulgaria. In the cases of those participating in the research, the family member that usually migrated was a woman, as this was the only choice due to divorce, death or disability of her husband, or in the knowledge that it was easier for women to find work “*because we knew that it was easier for women to find work in Greece*”.

The migration incentives of younger Bulgarian immigrants are different. The younger immigrants are either children of older female immigrants, who either continue their education in Greece, or, after completing their studies in Bulgaria (usually secondary education), seek employment in Greece near their mothers, who are permanently settled in Greece.

SECOND GENERATION OF IMMIGRANTS

In Greece, there is no numerically remarkable second generation of Bulgarian immigrants in the classical sense of the term, i.e. children born in Greece to Bulgarian immigrants, as the arrival of the first Bulgarian immigrants in Greece is somewhat recent (early 90s). However, after legalization processes in recent years, several female immigrants from Bulgaria sought steady work and subsequently

brought their underage children to Greece. These children may have been born in Bulgaria, where they spent the first years of their lives, perhaps even their first school years, but continue their primary or secondary education at Greek public schools. Some of these children have already completed secondary education in Greece and either remain in Greece as workers or higher education students, or return to Bulgaria to continue their studies at Bulgarian universities.

5. Bulgarian immigrants and the Greek labour market

Immigrants from the first periods of Bulgarian migration to Greece mostly found positions in domestic elderly care and secondarily in the farming sector and tourism. As previously noted¹⁸, a relatively large change was observed in the vocational status of the first wave of Bulgarian immigrants in comparison to their vocational status in Bulgaria, in contrast to the subsequent two waves. With the first wave of Bulgarian immigrants, a mostly female population with a relatively high level of education – at least secondary and technical secondary – came to Greece and mainly worked in domestic positions, providing care to the elderly. This may explain the harder and more painful adaptation faced by the first wave of Bulgarian immigrants. Characteristic responses include *“suddenly, I went from being the first lady of my small town to changing the diapers of an 80-year-old man”*, *“I was ashamed to say that I was providing care to the elderly”*, *“I used to supervise the organisation of the production of an entire factory and I suddenly became a servant”*. Their adaptation was not facilitated by their legal status in Greece (illegal residence and employment) or the nature of their work, where the private premises of their employers were the workspace of Bulgarian female immigrants. Other difficulties included the complete lack of knowledge of the Greek language and the lack of organisation of the Bulgarian community, apart from employment agencies formed to serve the needs of transporting illegal workers (with the participation of Bulgarians in their establishment and operation) and – as was expected – the ferocious exploitation of immigrants. The departure of women from their families was particularly painful, as they left underage children and elderly parents behind.

The processes for the legalization of illegal immigrants in Greece greatly helped the adaptation and labour incorporation of Bulgarian workers, enabling them to enjoy or at least assert the established labour and social rights enjoyed by Greek workers (social insurance, labour conditions, minimum wage, etc.). The action of various immigrant organisations that were extremely active during the legalization periods also helped.

¹⁸ See section “Vocational Status”

With regard to the position of the Bulgarian community in the Greek labour market, there is relative growth, particularly among the female immigrants of the first generation, who were initially employed as domestic staff to a great extent. After becoming legalized citizens, learning the Greek language and joining social networks, several of these women changed vocation and are currently employed as workers or employees, mainly in the sectors of cleaning services and tourism. Several managed to bring their underage children from Bulgaria to Greece, where they attended or are attending primary or secondary school.

In Bulgarian immigrants of the second wave (early 00s), the change in labour conditions appears minor, as, in most cases, these were individuals with relatively little education and experience in unskilled positions. These characteristics, combined with the existing networks of immigrants developed by the previous wave of Bulgarian immigrants to Greece, contributed towards their smoother incorporation in the Greek labour market.

In the third and final wave of immigrants (i.e. those who came to Greece after the accession of Bulgaria to the EU and mainly after 2009), a relative drop in the age of the incoming Bulgarian population and an increase in the male population have been observed. Without having accurate statistical data at our disposal and by making observations based on the sample of the field research and related testimonies, it appears male immigrants of this category are employed in technical labour, commercial stores trading in Bulgarian products and in transportation, while female immigrants are in enterprises offering cleaning services and in tourism.

Despite the change in the legal system concerning Bulgarian citizens after the Greek labour market was fully opened to them on 1 January 2009, there remain phenomena of exploitation to this date, mainly related to undeclared employment (and the consequent absence of social insurance) and to payment lower than the legally established minimum wage. A characteristic finding of the field research is the acceptance of this exploitation by Bulgarian immigrants (*“Despite these laws you mention, I don’t have the luxury of making demands. If I don’t agree, I will have to leave. Who knows when I’ll find another job during this crisis. Back home – in Bulgaria – my two children – who are students – expect support from me”*, *“it’s*

the same no matter where I go”, “even if I make less than the legal minimum, it’s still good. In Bulgaria, I’ve done tougher work for less money”). In several cases, Bulgarian immigrants don’t consider undeclared labour as exploitation by the employer, but as a conscious choice they make (*“why should my money go to the Social Insurance Institute (IKA)? When I need a doctor, under the IKA system I’d have to wait for months for my appointment and lose wages by going from office to office to collect signatures”, “even insured Greeks end up paying private doctors, what are we left to do!”*). One could perceive these opinions as indicators of adaptation to the Greek economy and social reality¹⁹.

The findings concerning the acceptance of any “exploitation” by Bulgarian workers or, at the very least, incomplete enjoyment of their rights in relation to the absence of a political culture of collective assertion could partially explain the absence of Bulgarians from the trade union movement in Greece. An exception can be found in the case of Konstantina Kuneva, whose case became known in December 2008. Kuneva was the secretary general of the Pan-Attican Union of Cleaners and Domestic Workers. Due to her trade union activity, she was the victim of criminal assault and bodily harm and her case was the focus of the media and the Greek criminal investigation and judicial authorities.

¹⁹ As noted by I. Petrakou, “Tax evasion and the large extent of the “parallel” economy (estimated at 30-40% of the GDP) in Greece shows that informal economic activity permeates all social strata. The above, combined with other expressions of financial behavior, such as resistance to salaried labour (showing preference to self-employment and public sector employment) and the preference or need for multiple employment (Tsoukalas, C., ‘Free Riders in Wonderland’, *Greek Political Science Review, Issue 1, Athens 1993, p. 5-39*), lead to people having different positions and interests in social stratification without having a class conscience. This financial behavior and practice is shaping the framework within which immigration to Greece will be incorporated”, Petrakou, I., “The construction of immigration in Greek society” in Marvakis, Ath., D. Parsanoglou & M. Pavlou (ed.), *Immigrants in Greece*, Ellinika Grammata publishing, Athens 2001, p. 31-56.

6. Relations of Bulgarian immigrants with Greeks and with other immigrants

First of all, it should be noted that it does not emerge either from the desk research or from the field research that there are cases of particular difficulty in the co-existence of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece either with Greeks or with other national groups. The spatial concentration of Bulgarians in Athens is aligned with that of aliens from third countries. However, an almost absolute absence of relations was noted between first generation Bulgarians and other nationalities at both the collective and the personal level. In contrast to their parents, the children of Bulgarian immigrants often state that their friends (apart from Greeks) also come from other countries, mainly Albania, Poland and Ukraine.

Relations between Bulgarian immigrants and Greeks were examined on two levels. On the first level, relations with Greeks as individuals / private citizens were examined. This relationship could be characterized as ambiguous. It is characteristic that despite the consciously dichotomous question “*Name some adjectives to characterize Greeks and some to characterize Bulgarians*”, the majority of interviewees refused to enter this dichotomy. In several cases, the Greek employer or former Greek employers were cited as the first option for help. However, we would characterize the relationship between Bulgarians and Greeks (individuals) as ambiguous, due to the usual perception of Bulgarians as unequal or non-equivalent by a large percentage of Greeks. There are characteristic cases of women who chose to work for less pay, but for employers who would address them as “*Mrs. So-and-so*” or would speak to them using the plural, as the Bulgarian women did to them.

On the second level, we examined relations between Bulgarians and Greeks in public spaces²⁰. At this level, examples of racism were cited, not towards the specific nationality, but towards aliens in general²¹. In this case, interviewees of

²⁰ By “public spaces”, we mean on the street, at stores, at the workplace, etc., as well as transactions with public administration.

²¹ For “non-Greeks”, i.e. for *Heterophilia and heterophobia*, see Pavlou, M., “Migrants ‘like us’: aspects of the response to the migration phenomenon in Greece and Europe” in Pavlou, M. & D. Christopoulos (Ed.), *Greece of Migration: Social participation, rights and citizenship*, KRITIKI publishing, Athens 2004, p. 39-87, as well as Marvakis, Ath., “Social inclusion or social apartheid”

both categories (with and without experience of the Greek education system) found it easier to enter into the dichotomous description of “anonymous” Greeks, either in the sense of anonymous public administration or in the sense of unknown “anonymous” Greeks. The statements made by children of Bulgarian immigrants are noteworthy, as they would not let their parents visit services on their own, since *“they immediately realized from their speech that they were foreigners and tried to trick them, to not provide them with services; all they wanted was to make sure they left their office quickly”*. Also noteworthy are the statements made by children of Bulgarian immigrants such as *“my mother and I try not to speak Bulgarian outside the house, as they immediately realize we are foreigners. My mum doesn’t speak Greek as well as I do”*. A characteristic response is *“no, everyone treats me well, since they can’t tell from my speech that I’m not Greek”*.

in Pavlou, M. & D. Christopoulos (Ed.), *Greece of Migration: Social participation, rights and citizenship*, KRITIKI publishing, Athens 2004, p. 88-120. For the operation of Public Administration vis-à-vis immigrants, see Varouxi, H., *Migration Policy and Public Administration. A human rights approach to social agencies and organisations of Civil Society. Conclusions of field research*, Working Papers 2008/17 within the framework of the research project titled “Athens and Immigration: Us and Others, Others and Us 2005-2007”, EPAN / 3RD CSF (http://arxeio.gsdb.gr/wp/wp_varouxi.pdf). For testimonies of Bulgarian immigrants, see Кадийска, Н. (ред.), *Български емигранти в Гърция разказват*, книга първа, Н. Кадийска publishing, Athens 2002 and Кадийска, Н. (ред.), *Български емигранти в Гърция разказват*, книга втора, Н. Кадийска publishing, Athens 2006.

7. Organisations of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece

Although organisations of the Bulgarian community in Greece could play a major role in the effort for the social inclusion of immigrants, in practice their existence is not a defining factor, nor an example of effective collective representation. As Schubert notes, *“the establishment of immigrant organisations is a phenomenon closely linked to modern migration and is desirable, to the extent that is an example not only of healthy behaviour of immigrants seeking structures for the collectivization of their needs and problems, but also of the quality of democracy as a framework for state organisation that does not deny anyone the right of expression and representation of their interests. The role of immigrant organisations cannot in any case be unreasonably and uncritically considered as positive. Their impact can be deemed beneficial for the process of incorporation of their members into the society receiving them with the existence of certain conditions”*²².

In this context, the issue of Bulgarian immigrant organisations in Greece was approached. Our research question was whether the immigrant organisations of Bulgarians in Athens actually function as bridges for their social and political inclusion or whether they work as “parallel societies”. In other words, we examined whether these organisations make a positive contribution to their inclusion in Greek society or whether they serve as channels of communication with the homeland and as means for the potential return and smooth re-entry into Bulgarian society after the return of immigrants to Bulgaria.

In this category, we also include newspapers published in Athens (or abroad) that address Bulgarian immigrants in Greece. This is because immigrant newspapers

²² See Schubert, L., “Immigrant organisations: Parallel societies or bridges of inclusion?”, paper presented during the colloquium titled *Civil Society and Immigration* organized by the Laboratory for the Study of Migration and Diaspora, University of Athens, Athens 2007. See also Schubert, L., *Immigrant organisations: Self-help groups or interest groups*, dissertation, Post-graduate programme in European and International Studies, Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2004. See also Varouxi, H., *Migration Policy and Public Administration. A human rights approach to social agencies and organisations of Civil Society. Conclusions of field research*, Working Papers 2008/17 within the framework of the research project titled “Athens and Immigration: Us and Others, Others and Us 2005-2007”, EPAN / 3RD CSF (http://arxeio.gsdb.gr/wp/wp_varouxi.pdf).

respond to the actual needs of immigrants, as do their organisations, and often work in a manner and with an influence similar to those of immigrant organisations.

HISTORY

Newspapers

The life of the newspapers published in Athens and addressed to Bulgarian immigrants follows – in terms of time and quality – the course of immigrant organisations²³, as newspapers have characteristics similar to those of immigrant organisations, i.e.:

- Provision of services (provision of information to immigrants with regard to administrative residence processes, insurance, retirement and pensions, employment-seeking, etc.).
- Contact with the national centre and contribution towards preserving the national identity (publications on the history of Bulgaria, presentation of immigrant works, organisations of visits by prominent Bulgarians – mainly from the field of culture, etc.).
- Representation of interests (each editor or director²⁴ of an immigrant newspaper usually formed an association after the establishment of the newspaper).

The first newspaper, “Svetlina”, was published a few months after the creation of the first association of Bulgarian immigrants, in early 1998. It quickly closed under unknown conditions. In the following year, two other newspapers that continue to exist to this day were published: “Bulgaria Today”²⁵ and “Bulgarian Voice”²⁶.

²³ Or vice versa. It is a case of the well-known question of which came first, the chicken or the egg.

²⁴ Just as migration from Bulgaria was primarily female in gender, the same was the case for the representation of interests (newspapers and associations).

²⁵ Its editor is the President of the “Bulgarian Cultural Centre”, which, after two and a half years of operation, burnt down due to arson in 2008.

²⁶ Its editor is the President of the “Greek-Bulgarian Association of Friendship”, which, like other associations, is essentially inactive or only formally active. She was a candidate with the “Arma Politon” (Panhellenic Citizen Chariot) party in the Region of Attica during the 2010 Regional - Local Elections.

During the next years, there were a few more efforts to publish Bulgarian newspapers for immigrants living in Greece, but they quickly closed down. Today, one more newspaper other than the aforementioned two is being published: “KONTAKTI”. A fourth newspaper, “Bulgarian News”, is prepared and published in Bulgaria and distributed in Greece and Cyprus.

The features that characterize the associations of the Bulgarian community in Greece also characterize these newspapers. There is intense focus on the editor/director and great competition among them, to the point of rivalry at times. In most cases, the editors/directors also participate in the management of organisations of the Bulgarian community.

Organisations of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece

In contrast to newspapers, recording the organisations of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece is not particularly easy. Apart from the lack of databases containing NGO data, there does not appear to be consensus on the precise definition of the term “immigrant organisations”. Thus, apart from the formally established organisations of the Bulgarian community in Greece that have historical action, many people consider Bulgarian immigrant organisations to include groups such as informal cultural choir groups, the society for adult training computer use, Sunday Bulgarian language schools for young Bulgarian children, ad hoc initiatives of immigrant newspapers such as the organisation of celebratory and other events, even informal offices providing services to Bulgarians who are seeking employment or wish to settle their legal affairs, such as pensions and transfer of work experience.

Within the framework of research carried out in the context of the study, it was found that the first Bulgarian association in Greece was established in 1991 under the name “Paisii Chilendarski”. Its members included Bulgarians who had entered mixed marriages and Greeks born in Bulgaria who were repatriated during that time. The incentive for creating the association was mainly to maintain contact with Bulgarian culture. Today, this association does not seem to carry out substantial activity, apart from preserving social ties and groups of friends. It can be assumed that after 20 years of residing in Greece, the inclusion of the founding members of the association – if not their outright assimilation – in Greek society is quite high.

In 1997, during the first processes for the legalization of illegal immigrants in Greece and the subsequent wave of migration from Bulgaria to Greece, Bulgarian immigrants arriving in Greece had a great need for information in their mother tongue. This need led to the creation of the first organized association of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece in late 1997 under the name “Vasil Levski” (the name of a Bulgarian national hero) to meet these needs. A few years later, after its President²⁷ left it, the association stopped operating.

In 1999, the editor of the “Bulgarian Voice” newspaper founded an association named “Greek-Bulgarian Association of Friendship”. This association did not conduct significant activity outside the field of culture and at present is essentially inactive.

The needs to organize the Bulgarian community of Athens were met during approximately the same time by the association “Bulgarian Community”, which was founded in 2001 and continues to operate to this day. The association – at least initially – received significant support from the Greek Communist Party, which also provided the association with a meeting place²⁸. The Communist Party supported the activity of the association by providing its immigrant members with services such as: Provision of information on the requirements for legalization by a specialised attorney of the party, networking for seeking employment, organisation of cultural and recreational events, such as excursions to various Greek locations, organisation of a poetry club, a painting club, a choir, events with prominent Bulgarian guests, etc. This association remains to this day a member of the Immigrant Forum (the most representative secondary organisation of immigrants in Greece, with widespread recognition) and is the only association of the Bulgarian community that is essentially recognized by other immigrant communities in Greece. Its recognition by other immigrant organisations is mainly due to its participation in anti-racist festivals and events organized by the Immigrant Forum.

²⁷ Evgenia Markova, then a PhD student at the Department of Economics of the University of Athens, carried out field research during that period on the contribution of Bulgarian immigrants to the Greek labour market. See Markova, E., *The Economic Performance of Bulgarian illegal and legalized immigrants in the Greek Labor market*, PhD thesis, Dep. of Economics, Univ. of Athens.

²⁸ Some of the interviewees insinuated that financial support may have been provided to the party, but there is no evidence of this.

Nevertheless, participants in the research did not refer to partnerships between this organisation and similar immigrant organisations or other agencies in Greece, nor participation in collective mobilization regarding issues of broader social and political interest, such as demonstrations by the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), anti-war demonstrations, etc.

In 2008, “Bulgarian Community” began operating a Sunday school teaching the Bulgarian language to children of Bulgarian immigrants. Initially, the school operated informally; later, it was formally included in another organisation specifically established for this purpose. Over time, the administration of the association often changed, due to major differences between its leaders, and it gradually grew independent from Communist Party support. Today, although it is formally operating, the activity of this organisation is limited in comparison to the past and mainly focuses on providing help to Bulgarian immigrants seeking employment.

In 2005, the “Bulgarian Cultural Centre” was founded, mainly aiming at covering the cultural needs of the Bulgarian community in Greece. Essentially, this centre is an extension of the activity of one of the Bulgarian newspapers published in Athens and addressing Bulgarian immigrants²⁹. The Centre operates as an area for expressing and hosting artistic and cultural activities of the Bulgarian community. As was the case for the two previous organisations, the Centre was subjected to intense friction between the members of the Bulgarian community. Two and a half years after its establishment, its offices were the target of arson.

In 2007, when the number of children of Bulgarian female immigrants living in Greece had increased significantly, the first (weekend) schools teaching the Bulgarian language appeared. These schools flourished in Greece after 2009, when the Bulgarian Ministry of Education began financing the operation of such schools abroad. As Bulgarian legislation requires that each foreign school financed must operate within an organisation of Bulgarian immigrants, four more organisations were created (one in 2009, one in 2010 and two in 2011).

²⁹ In reference to the newspaper “Bulgaria Today”.

FORMS OF ORGANISATION

In all the previous cases, the organisations of Bulgarian immigrants were established in a formal manner³⁰, in accordance with Greek Law. The necessary legal procedures for establishment and recognition by Greek and Bulgarian authorities were followed. Thus, the organisations acquired relative recognition by the community of immigrants, by Greek public opinion and by the Civil Society³¹.

REPRESENTATION OF THE COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION OF BULGARIAN IMMIGRANTS IN ORGANISATIONS

According to the responses of the field research sample and independently from the registration data of member records of these organisations (from which the extraction of quantitative results was impossible, in any case), the participation of Bulgarian immigrants in existing organisations is limited.

On the one hand, Bulgarian immigrants generally keep their distance from the collective organisation of their compatriots and from political life in general; on the other hand, the existing organisations of the Bulgarian community do not appear to have any remarkable activity other than the issue of operation of schools. Furthermore, the interest of organisations and of Bulgarian immigrants themselves in interests of social and labour inclusion was increased mainly during the periods before the accession of Bulgaria to the EU, when the issues of safeguarding and enjoying social rights were intense.

The offices of the older association *Bulgarian Community (Bulgarska Obshtost)* are only open on weekends for certain hours and mainly attract job seekers. The second association (*Buditeli*) exclusively focuses on the operation of the Bulgarian school, as the main reason for founding the association was to organize and operate this school. The three other associations (two with same name, “Greek-Bulgarian Cultural Association PAISII CHILENDARSKI” – one

³⁰ An exception is the women’s group of Bulgarian folk singers.

³¹ During the 2003-2009 period in particular, numerous NGOs participated in European co-financed programmes providing support to immigrants in Greece. These programmes required or encouraged cooperation with immigrant organisations, so there was a financial incentive for the establishment of organisations of Bulgarian immigrants.

operates as an association, the other as a civil non-profit organisation – and the “Greek-Bulgarian Cultural Association”) also mainly focus on organizing and operating schools for the children of immigrants. At the same time, the bulk of information provided to their members and to members of the Bulgarian community in Greece mainly concerns information on the schools operating within the three associations. This may justify the established belief of numerous Bulgarian immigrants, particularly those with children, that the “Association” and “school” are one and the same, while many Bulgarian immigrants without children are not even aware of the existence of these organisations.

For this reason, penetration among immigrants and the prestige of the five existing organisations of Bulgarian immigrants in Athens are often subject to dispute (even among representatives of organisations of the Bulgarian community) and their recognition by Bulgarian immigrants is often limited (in several cases, interviewees were completely unaware that organisations of Bulgarian immigrants in Athens existed). All the organisations focus intensely around one individual and the withdrawal of their President or some members can cause the organisation to fragment or even cease to operate. Today, at least three of these organisations mainly operate as social networking centres, which also operate Bulgarian language schools, financed by the Bulgarian state, that facilitate contact with the language and culture of Bulgaria and, for children that wish to be repatriated, provide the necessities for smooth re-entry upon return to Bulgaria³². The operation of these organisations is also characterized by intense competition between them, which has a financial impact with regard to attracting children, as it means greater financing from the Bulgarian Ministry of Education.

The low rates of participation of Bulgarian immigrants in the existing organisations of the Bulgarian community in Greece must not be ascribed to personal causes concerning the popularity of their representatives and leaders. The actual causes can

³² By attending the three classes taught at these schools (Bulgarian language, literature and history), pupils receive a certification, on the basis of which the school-leaving certificates they acquire from Greek primary and secondary schools are recognized as the equivalent of Bulgarian school-leaving certificates. With this certification, the children of Bulgarian immigrants attending Greek primary and secondary education schools can continue their education in Bulgaria without being forced to lose a year.

be sought in the perceptions of the immigrants themselves and the shortcomings of their organisations, as well as in the inadequacies of Greek immigration policy. The Bulgarian community in Greece has a relatively high educational level, while its elite are exceptionally active, with higher education degrees. Those older in age (who have resided in Greece for longer) brought with them some of the characteristics and experiences of the communist regime (inertia, lack of organisational skills). Correspondingly, younger Bulgarian immigrants brought the experiences of the rampant capitalism (individualism, absolute priority given to safeguarding economic benefits) that dominated Bulgaria in recent years, due to which they were essentially forced to migrate. Thus, the Bulgarian community in Greece is characterized to a great extent by a lack of culture of collective assertion and political organisation.

The above should also include the absence of common goals of the Bulgarian community in Greece. This is due to the high mobility of the Bulgarian population, who, despite their long-term residence in Greece, often seek their – even temporary – return to Bulgaria, and due to the fact that the members of the Bulgarian community often consider their presence in Greece to be temporary and do not perceive the role of the community as a factor of economic and social life in Greece (e.g. with regard to employment, the functioning of the economy, social activity, trade unionism, etc.). This conclusion emerged both from responses to the question “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?” and from the large numbers of children of immigrants enrolling in Bulgarian schools operating in Athens, aiming at being able to return, at some point, to Bulgaria³³.

Another important finding is the widespread perception of the non-equivalent position of economic immigrants, despite the accession of Bulgaria to the EU. Bulgarian immigrants (mainly of the first generation) state that they accept the statement “*in a foreign country, you cannot desire to be an equal citizen, regardless of membership in the European Union*” to a great extent.

³³ According to statements of the Principals of the schools in operation, for the 2011-12 academic year, approximately 300 children of all ages have enrolled.

At the same time, the absence of organized and systematic processes for consultation and cooperation between the Greek authorities responsible for designing and implementing immigration policy and the organisations of immigrants in Greece is a disincentive for the inclusion and activation of immigrants in organisations and for the substantial recognition of their organisations as “mediators” or agencies for advocating their rights and assisting in the shaping of immigration policy. In other words, the lack of possibilities of institutional representation of immigrants in various initiatives contributes towards weakening the incentives for the collective organisation and participation of immigrants so that they may assert their participation in similar institutional processes and deliberation mechanisms in a joint, coordinated manner. Finally, there are isolated incidents where public authorities treat Bulgarians as immigrants from third countries rather than as EU citizens, a fact that reinforces the belief of the latter regarding the (in)effectiveness of the mechanisms for their collective representation.

RELATIONS WITH BULGARIAN AND GREEK AUTHORITIES

Synergies between immigrant organisations and other organisations of the host country that are stronger and legalized in the perception of public opinion and support from the official authorities of the origin country are the most important means for sociopolitical recognition of the immigrants organizations³⁴. In this framework, during their inception, the organisations of Bulgarian immigrants in Greece sought support either from political parties or from the Bulgarian embassy; in at least one case, there was cooperation with and support from the Immigrant Forum.

Participants in the field research stated that there was general interest on behalf of Greek political parties in approaching these organisations, within the framework of

³⁴ See Schubert, L., “Immigrant organisations: Parallel societies or bridges of inclusion?”, paper presented during the colloquium titled *Civil Society and Immigration* organized by the Laboratory for the Study of Migration and Diaspora, University of Athens, Athens 2007. Schubert, L., *Immigrant organisations: Self-help groups or interest groups*, dissertation, Post-graduate programme in European and International Studies, Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2004.

providing them with information on their views regarding the immigration issue, primarily during election campaign periods. Nevertheless, with regard to relations with political parties and agencies, it was stated that the existing organisations of Bulgarian immigrants can function as a launching pad for their members, who may be seeking opportunities to participate in the social and political life of the country. As recorded during the field research, relations between the organisations and Bulgarian authorities have grown stronger in recent years, due to the possibility of financing of schools for the children of immigrants residing in Greece.

8. Participation of Bulgarian immigrants in political life and democratic institutions.

The participation of Bulgarian immigrants in the political life of Greece is examined from the perspective of the participation of immigrants as candidates and voters in the 2009 Euro-elections and the 2010 local government elections.

The representation of the Bulgarian community in terms of candidates appears impressive, as during two elections conducted in Greece following the accession of Bulgaria to the EU (2009 Euro-elections and 2010 Municipal and Regional elections), in which Community citizens could participate, three Bulgarian immigrants³⁵ appeared as candidates on the electoral lists of Greek political parties and coalitions. However, this fact, which greatly honours the Bulgarian community as a whole, as, for example, the ballot of the PASOK party, which won the 2009 Euro-elections, featured no Community citizens / immigrants other than Ms. Filevska, does not correspond to a proportional participation of Bulgarian immigrants in election processes, which, compared to the number of those entitled to vote, was particularly low.

The crisis of representation of the Bulgarian community and the low interest shown by Bulgarian immigrants residing in Greece in entering the election rolls and exercising their voting rights in the Euro-elections and Municipal and Regional elections is not negated by these three candidacies, which, despite their importance at the symbolic level, do not reflect the extent of participation of the actual community in the political life of the country. These candidacies on political party electoral lists are to be explained as an endeavour of these coalitions to bolster their “immigrant-friendly” profile, but without substantial follow-up, as neither these candidates nor other Bulgarian immigrants subsequently stood out or remained active in these political parties.

³⁵ These are: Blagorodna Filevska on the PASOK ballot in the 2009 Euro-elections, Diliانا Bairaktarova on the Panhellenic Citizen Chariot ballot for the Region of Attica in the 2010 Regional elections and Nedialka Karagiozova with the coalition of candidate Giorgos Kamini standing for the office of Mayor of Athens in the 2010 Municipal elections. Neither of the three candidates were elected, while all three have served as editors or directors of newspapers addressing Bulgarian immigrants in Greece.

PARTICIPATION OF BULGARIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE 2009 EURO-ELECTIONS

According to Presidential Decree 133/97, as amended and in force by Law 2196/94, Community citizens residing in Greece can equally participate in municipal and regional elections and in Euro-parliamentary elections. Within this framework, Bulgarian citizens can now vote and stand for office in these election processes. A necessary requirement for exercising the right to vote is registration by European citizens in the special electoral rolls of the Municipality or community where they reside. In order to register, they must visit the Municipality or community where they reside, present their passport or identity card and fill out an application-declaration of registration.

The 2009 Euro-elections provided Bulgarians residing in Greece with the first opportunity to participate in the political life of the country. Participation was particularly low, as merely 163 Bulgarian citizens registered in the electoral rolls, out of a total estimated population of approximately 100,000 Bulgarians living in Greece in 2009. During these elections, participation of Bulgarian immigrants was eighth, following the participation by citizens of the United Kingdom (2,071), Germany (1,185), Cyprus (528), Italy (463), France (354), the Netherlands (354) and Romania (190). With regard to the distribution of these voters among electoral regions, most Bulgarians were registered in the regions of Thessaloniki (17), Cyclades (16), Piraeus (15) and the Dodecanese (13).

During the 2009 Euro-elections, apart from the broader factors that deterred participation mentioned below, negative factors included the fact that this was the first time that Bulgarians could exercise their political rights as EU citizens residing in Greece, that there was great ignorance of the possibility of participation in the elections and that there was an exceptionally short period (three months, from 1st January to 31st March 2009) for registration in the special electoral rolls for foreign citizens in general and for Bulgarian immigrants in particular, who did not know what EU citizenship meant and entailed in regard to civic, social and political rights in the EU Member States where they settled.

PARTICIPATION OF BULGARIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE 2010 MUNICIPAL AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS

As was the case with the Euro-elections, in local elections, Community citizens must register by their own initiative in the special electoral rolls of the Municipality or community where they reside³⁶. Due to the voluntary – non-automatic – registration in the electoral rolls, we estimate that the number of registered voters greatly reflects the number of individuals that actually did vote in the elections.

Taking this observation into account, it is found that in the 2010 Municipal Elections, it appears that 2,059 Bulgarian citizens exercised their right to vote, out of a total population of Bulgarians residing in Greece that is estimated by organisations of the Bulgarian community at over 100,000³⁷. At first sight, the number of Bulgarian citizens registered in the electoral rolls was increased by 1,260% in comparison to 2009 and was the third largest among the 26 other EU Member States, behind citizens of Great Britain (4,015) and Germany (2,159), whose numbers also increased but not at such a significant rate (almost double than those registered in the Euro-elections). However, if the order of participation on the basis of absolute numbers is converted into order of participation on the basis of the population of each community in Greece, it emerges that, proportionally, the participation of Bulgarian citizens is much lower than that of British and German citizens (according to the 2001 Greek Population Census, there were 13,195 British citizens residing in Greece, 11,806 German citizens and 35,014 Bulgarian citizens, without taking into account the boom of Bulgarian immigration to Greece after 2001 and the “illegal” immigrants missing in the 2001 census). Thus, in proportion to the estimated population of 100,000 Bulgarian immigrants, the rate of participation in the most recent Municipal elections was approximately 2%, as compared to over 30% for British citizens and 18% for German citizens.

³⁶ Regarding the elections of November 2010, the right to vote was given to immigrants of Third countries legally residing in Greece. The main requirement of Law 3838/2010 (Gov. Gazette Issue 49^A, 24.03.2010) stipulated at least five years of continuous and legal residence in Greece. For the participation of immigrants in the November 2010 elections, see Koustenis, P., “The 2010 Municipal Elections in Athens: LA.O.S. or Kolonaki”, *Greek Political Science Review*, Issue 37, Themelio publications, Athens 2011

³⁷ The data of the 2011 population census will be published during the second half of 2012.

Similarly, in the largest Municipality of the country (Athens), estimated to be the home of the majority of the country's Bulgarian population, although Bulgarians were the largest group of Community citizens entered in the electoral rolls with 316 persons (while 118 persons entered the electoral rolls of Municipalities of the broader area of Athens), participation is also proportionally low (under 2% of the estimated population of Bulgarians residing in Athens who had the right to vote). These low rates of participation may be initially explained by inadequate provision of information by the media (both Greek and Bulgarian) on the possibility and the process of participating in elections for Community citizens and the lack of mobilization by organisations of Bulgarian immigrants with regard to this issue. These problems mainly appear in large urban centres, since in small communities the lack of organized coverage is often addressed through direct provision of information to interested parties by Municipalities and informal local networks.

REASONS FOR LOW PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE

As previously mentioned, the Bulgarian population in Greece is characterized by high mobility, with a majority of the population working seasonally or segmentally (they work for a certain period in Greece, return to Bulgaria for family or other reasons, and then return to Greece to find work anew). Segmented work, combined with the recorded belief that Greek political life and the operation of institutions do not concern immigrants³⁸, if not deterrents, are certainly not helping the politicization and active participation of the Bulgarian community in local political life.

The crisis of representativeness of Bulgarian organisations and the lack of adequate information on the political and social rights that EU citizenship entails deprive Bulgarians of the means that support active involvement in democratic processes. It is obvious that the change of the legal system, which now gives Bulgarian immigrants the right to vote and stand for office in local elections and Euro-

³⁸ In regard to the refusal of the state to allow immigrants to participate in any political decision, see Varouxi, H., *Migration Policy and Public Administration. A human rights approach to social agencies and organisations of Civil Society. Conclusions of field research*, Working Papers 2008/17 within the framework of the research project titled "Athens and Immigration: Us and Others, Others and Us 2005-2007", EPAN / 3RD CSF (http://arxeio.gsdb.gr/wp/wp_varouxi.pdf).

elections, is not enough, on its own, to ensure that immigrants mobilize and register in the special electoral rolls (especially with the condition of registration within a deadline of just three months before the elections are held). A main requirement is to identify interest in the participating coalitions and parties in the problems facing EU citizens of other Members States, living and working in Greece and corresponding commitments and proposals for the resolution of these problems. However, despite the interest of certain Greek political parties in immigrant problems, at least in their declarations, during the last elections, these parties usually cannot approach the Bulgarian population in a systematic manner, mainly due to the lack of organisations representing this population on a mass scale or other organized processes for dialogue with immigrant communities in general and the Bulgarian community in particular.

Moreover, the responses given by Bulgarian immigrants during the interviews carried out showed either a lack of culture of collective political actions or a distance kept from political life, both in Greece and in general. In direct questions³⁹, such as “*Are you interested in politics?*”, the prevailing answer was a definitive “no”⁴⁰. The majority of interviewees had never voted, even in Bulgarian elections, even though they were able to vote through the electoral departments operating for Bulgarians residing in Greece at the Bulgarian Embassy. The reason given for the distance kept from political life in Greece and in general by most interviewees was “*why should I be interested in politics...I’m here for a specific reason: to work and raise and educate my children*”, “*who has the time for politics?*”, “*I’m a part of politics but politics is far away from me*”, “*I am here out of necessity, I am not a part of Greece*”. As mentioned previously, the prevailing attitude is “*I am an economic immigrant and therefore unconcerned with political developments in this country*” and “*I will be here for a short while so there is no reason to become involved*”. We believe that this is a “blank” field for future activity of any organisation representing this community.

³⁹ We also posed indirect questions, asking whether the interviewees read newspapers and if so, which ones, whether they watched television shows and if so, which ones. The conclusions drawn from the responses given are similar.

⁴⁰ This response only differs in the case of graduates of Greek universities interviewed, who are admittedly better able to integrate into Greek society and the Greek labour market. One might assume that their views are not very different from the views of Greek citizens of their social position.

The factors that contributed to low participation include inadequate information, not on the part of the Greek administration⁴¹, but on the part of the Bulgarian press circulated in Greece. The four newspapers circulating throughout Greece were characterized by very limited interest in covering the participation of Bulgarians in elections, in contrast to other issues, such as retirement and pensions, insurance, insurance stamps and establishment of work experience. In fact, one newspaper cited related information only once⁴², as an entry from the Ministry of the Interior, in the Greek language (!), without any processing or commentary. In another newspaper, there was limited reference to the elections, providing general information on the participation of immigrants from third countries in local elections.

A final factor that inhibited participation appears to be the process of registration of EU citizens in electoral rolls, with such citizens given just three months to complete the process, which must be repeated for each election. Taking into account that the mobilization of Greek voters, who do not have to register in the electoral rolls for each election, has been very low in recent years, it is easy to grasp that the mobilization of immigrants is even more difficult, especially when several feel that they are “*here for a short while*” and that they are detached from the political life of Greece.

⁴¹ All the editors of Bulgarian newspapers admitted that they received related information concerning the processes and terms for the participation of immigrants in elections from various public services, without having requested any such information.

⁴² In all the special Press for Bulgarian immigrants, very few publications relating to this issue were identified (not exceeding three).

9. Conclusions

The Bulgarian community in Greece is the second largest immigrant community, following that of Albanians, and its presence in Greece had already begun in the early 90s. The majority of the Bulgarian community is comprised of women, while the average age is slightly higher than that of most immigrants residing in Greece. Most Bulgarian immigrants are graduates of secondary education, while most of them residing in urban centres and are employed in cleaning and elderly care services. Throughout the rest of Greece, a significant percentage of the Bulgarian population is employed in agriculture / stock-breeding and in tourism.

The accession of Bulgaria to the EU and the formal acquisition and establishment of the rights of EU citizens by Bulgarian immigrants in Greece did not particularly change their position in the labour market and society. Thus, there are still instances of discrimination with regard to working conditions and the problems of undeclared labour and unemployment of numerous immigrants in low quality positions that do not correspond to their qualifications remain. Bulgarian female immigrants, due to the fields in which they are mainly active, i.e. care and cleaning services, are often the victims of discrimination that is not affected by Community citizenship, but is the result of widespread practices of financial exploitation of immigrants working in these fields. The factors that seem to have the greatest impact on the social inclusion of Bulgarian immigrants are duration of residence, knowledge of the language and finding steady work. Despite the participation of three representatives of the Bulgarian community in the ballots of Greek political parties in the latest Euro-elections and local elections, the majority of Bulgarian immigrants do not prioritise participation in the political life of Greece and in democratic processes, as their main concern is to safeguard their employment, while there is no particular awareness of the possibilities of participation and on having an impact on developments through collective action. The percentage of Bulgarians registered in the electoral rolls of Greece is estimated at approximately 2% of the total population of Bulgarian immigrants residing in Greece.

Most Bulgarian citizens residing in Greece are characterized by a lack of a culture of collective organisation and assertion. This characteristic is reflected in the

difficulty or reluctance to self-organise. Despite the existence of several organisations, there is a crisis of representativeness, as the existing organisations do not attract the interest of most Bulgarian immigrants, who are often unaware that such organisations exist, while the organisations did not succeed in expanding their agenda to issues of social interest, beyond those of education and networking for finding work. This shortcoming in the representativeness and collective expression of the Bulgarian community hinders agencies (the state, political parties, trade unions, other NGOs) from approaching the Bulgarian community in an institutional manner and hinders members of the community from identifying their selves and rights with any of the existing organisations and trust these organisations with representing them. Furthermore, the organisations are often characterized by intense introversion, which adds to their inability to adopt and project a broader concern with asserting rights and/or combating discrimination, seeking cooperation with political parties, agencies and other immigrant organisations.

In order to overcome these shortcomings, interventions are necessary both at the level of organisations of Bulgarian immigrants (such as those promoted within the framework of the “Access to Rights and Civil Dialogue for All” project) and at the level of agencies and authorities of the host country. With regard to community organisations and the extent to which they wish to operate as mediators or as representatives of Bulgarian immigrants, it would be expedient to empower them in such a way so as to enable them to provide support to their members in asserting and exercising their social, civil and political rights. This empowerment concerns the infrastructure and skills of their members and enhancing the means at their disposal for providing information and services to their members, as well as the initial stage of establishment, in order to assist in the self-organisation of immigrants in collective bodies of representation. At the same time, the utilization of existing information channels (immigrant newspapers) must focus on providing substantial and richer information on the rights of Community citizens, particularly in regard to participation in the democratic life of the host country.

However, the main field of intervention concerns public authorities, political parties and bodies of the Greek Civil Society and host countries, in general. As shown by responses given during field research, most immigrants do not feel that their

participation in democratic institutions and collective action can help resolve the problems they face; they also feel that the political life of Greece does not concern them.

On the other hand, Greek parties – in fact, not all of them – recently began addressing immigrants as a substantial, active part of Greek society, whose concerns and expectations they should take into account in their political programs and campaigning and in their actions. In the same direction, trade unions in host countries and in Greece, in particular, often address the problems faced by immigrant workers as a minor priority, possibly due to the fact that the phenomenon of undeclared labour, although usually due to exploitation by employers, seems to operate competitively or negatively with regard to the interests of local workers. Finally, the Greek authorities responsible for immigration policy have not established systematic processes for dialogue and cooperation with immigrants and their communities; as a result, the issue of their representation through existing organisations is not particularly important.

Within this framework, it would be useful to have interventions addressed to the aforementioned bodies (Public Authorities, Political Parties, Trade Unions), supporting the processes of dialogue and cooperation with immigrant communities and encouraging the participation of immigrants and/or their representation in institutions of collective expression and action and in democratic processes. This mobilization would issue a clear message to refugees, stating that their collective action, either through organisations of their national community or through institutions and organisations of the host country, has a purpose and tangible results. The effort that began during the recent Euro-elections and local elections with the participation of Bulgarian immigrants in the electoral lists of certain political parties must continue and be expanded, giving substance to the legal provisions concerning the right of EU citizens to stand for office in the Member State in which they reside.

The establishment of a cohesive society, particularly during periods of economic crisis, requires the promotion and protection of all the elements that compose the common interests and common values of its members. In the words of Jean Monnet, the father of the European idea, *“union between individuals or communities is not*

natural; it can only be the result of an intellectual process... having as a starting point the observation of the need for change. Its driving force must be common interests between individuals or communities”.

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Annex I – Organisations of Bulgarian Immigrants in Greece

1. Athens

- **Greek-Bulgarian Association of Friendship and Mutual Aid** – *association*
President: Dilyana Bayraktarova
- **Bulgarska Obsnost (Bulgarian Community)** – *association*
President: Rosen Christov
- **Buditeli (Enlighteners)** – *association*
President: Galina Gradeva
- **“Kiril I Metodii” Sunday school**
Director: Daniela Todorova
- **Greek-Bulgarian Cultural Association “Paisii Chilendarski”** – *civil non-profit company*
President: Nina Yaneva
- **“Paisii Chilendarski” Sunday school**
Director: Nina Yaneva
- **Greek-Bulgarian Cultural Association “Paisii Chilendarski”** – *association*
President: Blagorodna Filevska
- **“Paisii Chilendarski” Sunday school**
Director: Blagorodna Filevska
- **Greek-Bulgarian Cultural Association** – *civil non-profit company*
President: Lioubomir Bourov
- **Bulgaria Dnes – Bulgaria Today** – *weekly newspaper*
Editor: Nina Kadiiska
- **Bulgarski Glas – Bulgarian Voice** – *bi-weekly newspaper*
Editor: Dilyana Bayraktarova
- **Kontakti – Contacts** – *bi-weekly newspaper*
Editor: Valeria Spirova
- **Bulgarski Novini – Bulgarian News** - *bi-weekly newspaper (published & printed in Bulgaria and distributed in Greece)*
Editor: Boyka Atanasova
- **Bulgarite v Gartsia – Bulgarians in Greece** www.abritus.info – *informative website*
Editor: Victor Petrov

2. Patras

- **Association of Bulgarians of the Peloponnese “Chan Asparouch”** (*inactive for some time*)
President: Yordan Dobrev

3. Thessaloniki

- **Religious Sunday school of the Zograf Monastery – *Sunday school operating under the auspices of the Bulgarian monastery “Sveti Velikomachenik Georgi Zograf” on Mount Athos - www.bnuzograf-gr.com***
Director: Dilyana Frangopoulou
- **Association of Greek-Bulgarian Friendship “Kiril I Metodii” – *association***
Head: Vassilios Frangopoulos

Annex II – Field Research Questionnaire