

SURVEY OF REFUGEES IN THE REGION OF ATTICA

Union of Greek Regions (ENPE)

Introduction

The displacement of people is not a new phenomenon in the history of mankind. A variety of causes – usually severe or traumatic such as war, disease, poverty, environmental disasters, etc. – would always trigger migration of various groups. Similarly, the recent war in Syria and the general instability in the Middle East has sparked the biggest population displacement known today in Europe since the end of World War II.

The gravity of this current situation in Europe is not limited to its proximity (through Greece) to the core of the crisis: the refugee flow is being enhanced – in both frequency and intensity – by the great technological advances in transportation and telecommunications, which have virtually abolished the geographical borders between the once "closed" Nations-States and strengthened both the economy and the political/social structures of the Union. In other words, Europe is and will remain the refugees' and immigrants' attraction despite reactions by its Member States. For Greece, however, the gravity of the situation lies in the overlap of two crises: the economic one and, lately, the refugee crisis.

To be sure, migration is a global social issue requiring transnational cooperation in order to be addressed. However, it also requires the coordination of all related government policies and actions into a viable plan, which is exactly what is missing today leading any agreement at the top international level to failure within a matter of days.

In this context, the Union of Greek Regions and Kapa Research took the initiative to explore the refugee issue in its "source", that is to reach out to the refugees in Greece, located in the old airport (Elliniko), the port of Piraeus, Schisto and Elaionas, thereby attempting a first "mapping" of this population following a three-pronged research focus: *origin - route - destination* (Who are the refugees? What are their reasons that led them to Greece? How long are they considering staying here? Where do they want to end up? etc.), conducting each interview anonymously and individually in Arab, Afghan and English, and abiding the codes of conduct dictated by ESOMAR with respect to approaching vulnerable social groups.

Analysis of findings

1. Who are the refugees? Identity & demographics

The majority of them are Syrians (74%), men (73.8%), young people (72.2% up to 35 years old) and limited education (61.3% with *no* or *up to 9 years* of education). Refugees staying in the designated accommodation centers of Attica are Sunni Muslim (83%) and their religious faith largely determines their identity since most of them pray daily (58.1%). Their most sufficient communication language is Arabic, while about 25% speaks English. In terms of professional skills, 2/3rds declare themselves as economically active. In their country of origin, they were employed in industrial/craftwork (19.6%), the public sector (12.5%), retail/trade (11%), a bank or another private services company (7.5%), and approximately

10% in farming/livestock professions. The economically non-active population (37.5%) consists of pupils/students (15.5%), unemployed (10.8%) and housewives (11.2%).

2. Causes of migration

The description given by refugees regarding the current situation in their countries of origin is terrifying: nonstop bombings (65.4%), civil war (33.5%), a climate of terrorism (32.7%), and frequent hostilities (28.8%). Not surprisingly, therefore, the 7 out of 10 state *high risk for their lives or their family* – i.e. their survival – as the most important cause of migration. 6 out of 10 have lost a family member: from bombing (26.2%), stray gunfire (14.4%) armed conflicts (10.5%), terrorist attacks (10.1%), and from strikes by government forces (9%). Other, secondary, causes of migration are to *avoid military service/battle, poverty and shortage of essential goods and facilities, as well as restrictions of civil/political rights and the need for family reunification.*

The links with the country of origin are kept through the family, since 9 out of 10 have left behind a family member (such as parents (57.2%), siblings (46.9%), other relatives (33.8%), children (13.5%)) or property (53.1% still have property in their country of residence). Consequently, the majority say they would like to return home some time in the future, when the war is over. The responsibility for the situation in their country forcing them to emigrate is mainly attributed to that country's regime/ government (56.6%) and less so to ISIS (36.3%) or other paramilitary organizations (such as the Free Syrian army (22.4%), the al-Nursa front (16.6%), the Taliban (12.3%), the Kurdish PKK (8.4%) and YPG (10,8%).

3. The journey

More than half of the refugees participating in the survey (53.1%) maintain their optimism despite the difficulties, and believe that *in a year from now things will be much or even a little better*. Significant, however, is the percentage of those who appear as pessimists (38.5% think that *things will be about the same or worse*), a figure that is expected to rise as the transit towards Central Europe becomes less likely. More specifically, the flight from ultimate evil – which is what their home was – to something better, though unknown and uncertain, causes mixed feelings: hope (24.7%) and joy (12.5%), as well as fear (22.4%), anxiety (20.2%) and anger (11.6%).

Coming from societies where family is the basic structure, 7 out of 10 are traveling with a relative or a person familiar to them. For most (62.8%), the journey has lasted less than 30 days, while 6 out of 10 have stayed for over ten days in a transit country's accommodation center – possibly in Turkey. Before leaving their country they received important information from friends or relatives already established in an EU country (36.6%) or found information through the *internet and social media* (20,2%). The internet seems to play an important role during the trip as the majority (53.5%) state that they have been using a *smartphone*.

Most respondents paid someone in order to arrive in Greece: 53.1% state that they paid someone for help, and despite the activation of the organized structures of the Greek State and of NGOs, 20.9% gave a fee for moving within Greece as well. In most cases (52.1%), the

person who received the fee treated refugees well, while in 36.1% of the cases the behavior of the trafficker was bad.

4. The destination

7 out of 10 (68%) refugees who currently reside in the Attica region's accommodation centers want to go to Germany and state they are very or fairly optimistic that they will (59.6%). The choice of destination is mainly based on the *presence of other relatives* (64.5%), *compatriots* (12.3%) and, secondarily, on the basis of *friendly refugee reception conditions* (17%), *legitimation* (easy asylum granting process - 14.6%) and *living standards (finding a job - 8.8%)*.

Greece (77.6%) and Germany (74%) gather the most positive opinions among countries that play a role in the refugee issue, in contrast to Turkey and Russia, which are met negatively (50.8% and 44.7 % negative opinions - only 15.1% and 8.4% positive opinions on the two countries respectively). The European Union also receives high acceptance rates (57.8%, just 6.7% negative assessments). In contrast to the growing *Eurosceptic* sentiment experienced by the peoples of some of its member states, refugees see Europe as a role-model place of prosperity.

5. Greece as transit country

Despite positive opinions, Greece is not a destination country. Even if – in their first attempt – they do not make it past the border into central Europe, only a 12.5% of the refugees would choose to stay in Greece [either in some organized structure (8.6%), or with relatives/friends who already reside in Greece (3.9%)]. Most would temporarily *stay in the refugee camp hoping for the border to be opened* (54.4%), *would seek another passage by themselves* (13.5%), or *return home* (16.8%).

Greece is a transit-country mainly because of the ease to get past its borders (76.3%) and due to lower cost of getting here (*it is cheaper* (19.1%). Other reasons included: *easier paperwork process to get to central Europe* (16.1%), *Greeks are welcoming and helping refugees* (13.8%), *the Greek authorities are not that strict* (11.4%) and, finally, *the Greek government is friendly towards refugees* (7.1%).

Given the circumstances, 40.6% feel good about their stay in Greece so far, 24.5% indifferent, while 26.5% feel bad. Without exception, all institutions/organizations involved in managing the refugee crisis in Greece are strongly approved: the Coast Guard, the police, the government, NGOs, the health system and the local government, all receive positive rates of over 60%. The main problem encountered by refugees in touch with these services of the state is language (53.5%).

Nearly 7 out of 10 consider the status of the area where they are staying as problematic (Piraeus, Elliniko, Schisto, Elaionas) mainly in terms of decent living conditions, i.e. bathrooms/toilets (81.3%), *bed/sleeping area* (58.5%), and *money* (37.4%). 4 out of 10 state that they are faced with health problems and 3 out of 10 that they became ill or injured during the journey.

6. Greece as country of residence

Despite the fact that the majority of surveyed refugees would not choose to settle in Greece, almost 3 out of 10 say they would stay under certain conditions: 27.9% would stay if they found a job, and 30.1% will request for asylum in Greece if they do not manage to cross the border. 31.8% would stay in Greece because it is *easier compared to other countries*, 25.8% *because there already exists a family member/s or a community from his country here*, and 14% because Greece has a *good welfare system*. 24.1% of those surveyed would seek the reunification with their family by inviting them in Greece, if they would eventually stay here.

As with any period of high migration flows, the country's urban areas – especially the capital – are the desired place of stay: 49.7% of refugees will try to settle in the Athens area, while 22.4% would stay anywhere as long as it could ensure work, food and shelter. However, only 21.9% think that they have potential in finding a job in Greece: of those, 21.6% are able to work as laborers, 20.7% as office employees, 17% in ancillary work, and another 17.1% would start a business or open a shop. Another 17.1% could be employed in the agriculture-livestock sector, while a 6.5% would exercise a specialized profession (doctor, lawyer, engineer etc.).

Conclusion

In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural. Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations. People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.

Following the recent terrorist attacks in European territory, Huntington's (1996) view on the *clash of civilizations* seems timelier than ever. However, diversity is a genuine pact for the world we live in. Acceptance or refusal of the European multicultural model of the recent decades does not negate that pact, neither the need to create new rules of coexistence.