

‘This is not my country’: illegal immigration through Patras towards the ‘Eldorado’ of Western Europe

Julia A. Spinthourakis

P. Antonopoulou

University of Patras, Greece

Abstract

This case study briefly chronicles the history of illegal immigration during the last two decades through the gateway to Western Europe via the port of Patras, Greece. It provides information about the city as a means of understanding its orientation and ability to deal with the consequences of increased illegal, albeit transient, immigration while focusing on the experiences of the illegal migrants and the conditions under which they have lived during their sojourn in the city.

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Greece is a southern European country of approximately 11.5 million inhabitants (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2001) at the tip of the Balkan Peninsula on the Mediterranean Sea. It is a country of extensive coastal borders, with nearly 3,000 islands surrounding the mainland. It has 15,000 kilometres (9,300 miles) of coastline, but only 494 kilometres bordering a European Union (EU) country, Bulgaria (The World Fact Book, Washington, DC: Online, 2008). Another 794 kilometers borders countries outside the EU: Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Turkey.

Patras: the gateway to the west

Patras the geographic area of our case study is a city of between 170 and 180,000 permanent residents situated in a larger urban zone of over 300,000 inhabitants (Urban Audit, 2004). Patras is the largest city in the region, the country’s third largest port and second largest in terms of sea travel. Built in the foothills of Mount Panachaikon,

overlooking the Gulf of Patras, it is the capital of the Achaia Prefecture on the north-western tip of the Peloponnesian peninsula, the southernmost part of mainland Greece. It is an ancient city steeped in history (Human Resources and Development Planning on both sides of The Ionian Sea, 2007). Once a thriving economic hub, Patras was one of the major industrial centres of Greece, however, the deindustrialization of the city in the late 1980s and 1990s caused severe problems as factories and manufacturing centers closed, to relocate in other countries (Research Academic Computer Technology Institute, 2006).

Patras is considered Greece's sea gateway to the West with ships leaving its docks daily to travel across the Ionian Sea and the Adriatic Sea to find their way to various Italian ports, including Bari, Ancona, Brindisi, and Venice. When Greece was in actual fact a place people migrated from and not to, thousands of Greeks travelled to Patras to secure passage on the ships leaving for the West. The port contributed greatly to overseas immigration, especially during the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The Greeks who left the country (Kasimis & Kassimi, 2004) migrated not only to Europe but also The United States (Wallner, 2003). Up until the late 1960s, the main means of transportation for the immigrants were the ocean liners that often docked in Patras.

Illegal immigration to Greece and Patras

If Patras is Greece's gateway to the West, then Greece can be seen as Europe's eastern gateway (Kasimis & Kassimi, 2004), but not necessarily in a positive light since its become something of an open door for illegal immigration into the EU. There's little question that Greece has become the frontline of immigration and easiest backdoor into the EU (Smith, 2009). The challenge of dealing with migration flows towards the EU through Greece (Papadopoulou, 2004) have increased over the last few years with, according to Frontex², the biggest increase in illegal traffic coming through its land and sea borders with Turkey (Kitsantonis, 2007).

According to European news reports, in 2008, over 150,000 known migrants mostly from Asia but also from Africa illegally entered Greece. Adding to the challenges of dealing with illegal migrants is the plight of minors and especially unattached minors, that is, persons 18 years of age or younger, who illegally migrate with or without a parent or legal guardian. In 2008, it was estimated that as many as 3,000, mostly Afghan, minors with some as young as six were unceremoniously cast off boats onto remote Greek islands by traffickers (Smith, 2009). The conditions under which these and the majority of illegal migrants make their way to Greece are extremely dangerous and quite awful. They are often cramped in small disreputable boats, second-hand cargo ships;

they may traverse Greece's mountainous northern borders on foot (O'Brien, 2003) or be hidden in trucks (lorries/tractor trailers) which cross borders either via road or by ferry and tend to travel in the dead of night to avoid detection. The illegal migrants or their families pay exorbitant amounts of money to smugglers or 'slave traders'³, in many cases thousands of Euros' and more oftentimes than not find themselves dumped onto some out-of-the-way Aegean island or even worse thrown into the sea (O'Brien, 2003, pp. 29-31).

The lucky few who do make it into the country with or without being discovered tend to live under appalling conditions. If they have been discovered by the authorities they are placed in refugee camps on the larger islands or in northern prefectures. Being placed in one of these camps is no guarantee that the conditions will be better than the makeshift camps the undiscovered tend to live in (O'Brien, 2003, pp. 39-40). This latter group appears to find shelter in illegal migrant camps, halls, abandoned buildings (O'Brien, 2003, p. 6) and other places with their major concentration points being in Athens and Patras. The former is preferred since the capital has an increased presence of NGOs, access to government authorities which is needed if they want to try to acquire asylum status in Greece,⁴ whereas the latter offers a better chance to stow away on trucks boarding ferries going from Patras to Italy (Papadopoulou, 2004, p. 175; O'Brien, 2003, p. 12). Given the uncertainty, lack of organization and resources, most of these migrants don't want to stay in Greece. What they want is to move on (Smith, 2009; Papadopoulou, 2004), thus, the irony loaded statement 'This is not my country' often heard from the illegal migrants.

Patras, one step shy of the promise of Eldorado

Illegal migrants who have successfully manoeuvred through all the difficulties to make it to Greece and finally to Patras live in a state of 'neither here nor there' something similar to a state of 'permanent temporariness' (Papadopoulou, 2004, p. 176; Bailey, Wright, Mountz, & Miyares, 2002); for all intents and purposes--a state of limbo. Their goal was and is to leave, not to stay; they wanted and still want to make it across the Ionian and Adriatic Sea and land on Italian soil so that they might continue on to their final destinations which are not usually Southern European countries but rather those in the north of Europe.

Illegal immigration through Patras is not a new phenomenon, it dates back at least to when Greece became a member of the EU (1981), however, the numbers then were low and virtually invisible. Perhaps due to the small numbers or tempered by the city's experiences in dealing with the arrival of refugees from Asia Minor in 1922 or because nearly every Greek has at least one relative who has emigrated to another country, people

were less apt to complain and appeared willing to contribute and assist in temporarily ensuring their welfare (O'Brien, 2003, p. 24). This in contrast to the way many reacted when Greek refugees from Asia Minor arrived 70 years earlier as part of the population exchanges between Greece and Turkey (Vergeti, 1991).

However, when the illegal migrant numbers began to grow in 1997 with the arrival of the first 200 Iraqi Kurds, the challenges and problems also grew. This was and is exacerbated by the fact that Patras has neither a reception centre nor the infrastructure in place to deal with even small numbers of illegal migrants (O'Brien, 2003, p. 11). Consequently migrants appear to accept that, being 'in transit' is a period of harsh living conditions, constant uncertainty and marginalization" (Papadopoulou, 2004, p. 179). Furthermore, immigration issues are under the jurisdiction of the central government, not the local authorities.

But who were they, what did they find, where did they end up and how did they proceed? They were illegal and they came to Patras to leave as quickly as possible for an Italian port, neither of which were necessarily chosen because that was their ultimate goal but rather because they were the first European countries they could reach on their trek to their final destination. At first they found no support systems and only over time did small volunteer groups and groups such as the Greek Red Cross and Doctors without Borders offer some assistance.

Along the harbour, across from the passenger terminal of the Port of Patras, are old deserted railway buildings and abandoned railway cars resting on long unused railway tracks. It was here that the refugees set up one of their first illegal camps, those who could, claimed the spaces in the buildings and the railway cars. The rest set up makeshift tents, plastic sheeting attached in some way to the railway cars, or cardboard boxes, whatever they could find and when they couldn't find anything, they slept under the railway cars. No running water, no toilet facilities BUT less than 30 meters from their gate to "Eldorado." Starting with single digit numbers and increasing to triple digit figures, the illegal refugee numbers grew quickly, in later years running into several thousand. Running across the roadway in mass or darting in and out of oncoming traffic to try to get onto, into, under or on top of trucks that were entering the Port of Patras and the ferries on which they had booked passage to take them to Italy. Disruption of traffic, near fatal accidents, health and hygiene issues as well as other factors, ultimately forced the authorities to 'move' the illegal migrant squatters out of the railway yard.

For a very short time, other facilities were found, but these were far from their view of their means to get to "Eldorado." Around the same time another group lived in an old, multi-story, boarded up hotel that was scheduled for renovations that were never completed because of the owner's financial difficulties; here too there was neither water

nor electricity and obviously no working toilet facilities.

After a spate of complaints from local residents about home robberies (the hotel's balconies provided easy access to other adjoining apartment buildings), the illegal migrants were forcibly removed. The Africans and especially the Somali's moved to the Old City high above the main city (Kanistra, 2008), other groups, usually the minors, settled into olive groves east of the port along the seaside road, some lived in parks and slept on benches, building open fires to cook what food they could find. The more organized would go to the local open air markets which take place almost every day at different locations in the city and wait until closing time to rummage through what was thrown away, dropped to the road side or given to them by the local farmers.

In recent years the illegal migrants have 'built' various camps, the most recent and perhaps well known is the one razed by the authorities in 2009. Located about 1.5 kilometres east of the port, hidden behind tall cattails and bushes, the camp was made up of many makeshift structures. It had no direct water or electricity; to bathe they would cross the seaside road and use either the public beach showers installed for the beachgoers or simply bathe in the sea but for electricity, the refugees illegally accessed it through jerry-rigged splicing of power lines leading into the apartment buildings alongside the camp.

The local residents regularly complained to the police, the mayor and regional authorities as well as the central government. Their complaints concerned sanitation conditions aggravated by the overcrowded nature of the camp which boasted a mosque and a hospital tent for when the Doctors without Borders would come by, and for their personal safety as well as that of their homes which were adjacent to the camp. After a fire broke out in the camp, the illegal migrants even managed to bring in fire extinguishers to combat it, but the locals were adamant about wanting them moved. Negotiations were started on building an illegal migrant reception camp but the initiative failed to materialize as no community was willing to sanction it.

The 'in transit' migrant ethnicities also changed. From a predominance of Iraqis the mix began to change with the advent of Afghans, Asian Muslims from former Soviet central and eastern republics as well as Sudanese, Somalis, Eritreans, Kurds, Iraqis and Palestinians. Along with the changing faces of the population came a rise in tensions between them. There have been instances of intergroup violence between the different ethnicities as they are in fact divided into small ethnic enclave groupings. This situation is especially true of tensions between the Afghans and Somali's as well as the Sudanese. The former group's presence in Patras is older than the latter's with the Afghans resenting the later arrival of the Somalis and the added competition for their chances of making it onto the trucks and ferries.

Until 2008, most of the illegal African migrants had lived in old abandoned buildings in the Old City of Patras, high above the newer city and overlooking the Gulf of Patras and the port but police raids forced them to move down to the seaside. In 2008, territorial claims as to who would be where along the seaside port resulted in violence erupting on the streets bordering the port, with police intervention; knives, chains and clubs were drawn and the situation at one point was extremely critical with at least one Somali being rushed to the regional medical centre.

For the first time the two groups of enraged and belligerent illegal migrants had left the seaside area of the port and made their way to the centre of the city's business district. The residents and shoppers were concerned and surprised that the violence had both fermented and escalated within their midst (Kanistra, 2008). The issue was solved when the two groups apparently divided the coastal road they inhabited at the juncture of the reconstructed Patras Lighthouse built on the seafront at the western border of the port across from the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Andreas, a Byzantine Basilica which is the seat of the Bishop of Patras and the site of the crucifixion of the Apostle Andrew. The Afghans continued to live in their shanty camp to the east of the port and the Somalis and other Africans lived in the area west of the port; bathing in the Gulf of Patras and cooking communal meals on open fires. Even the bulldozing of the Afghani camp which housed nearly 1500 migrants at the time it was demolished has not radically changed things. Their settlements are smaller, less visible, but they continue not to be near the port. Some Somali's have taken to sitting around the parking lots of supermarkets waiting for customers to unload their shopping carts and to let them take the carts back to get the coins out of the slots.

More respectable than begging, they eke out a living by collecting the coins ranging from 50 cents to 2 Euros and when they have enough, they enter the supermarket and buy bread and other food stuffs. However, the locals are often put off by their persistent presence and the local markets have taken to employing security guards. A number of the Afghans have started doing manual labor day jobs. But they have also taken to congregating along the national highway leading into the city, at junctures where trucks must either stop for a red light or slow down to turn onto the road leading to the port. Why? To jump onto the back of the truck and possibly find an door open, or crawl under the truck carriage hanging on in hopes that they will go undetected and make it onto the ferry and ultimately to Italy. But illegal migrants have died in their quest to make it onto a truck in this manner; and even making it onto or into a truck doesn't guarantee they will live through the journey.

In the end though, for most, the mantra is: 'This is not my country' and the goal is to make it out of Greece on their way to their personal "Eldorado." The reasons vary

and much can be said about the responsibility that the government has with respect to this situation. Finally, O'Brien's (2003, section 3, p.8) transcription of questionnaire responses from a group of Iraqi migrants perhaps best summarizes the plight of the illegal migrant trying to make his way out of Greece through the port of Patras: "We are sleeping in the parks. There are no baths. There is no bread. Winter is coming. What will happen to us? It is very difficult and there isn't any way out to leave the country. We are Miserable. The Greek government doesn't do anything for us. They just want to forget about us. We are asking the Greek government to either open the way to Italy, or accept our asylum [applications]".

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Notes

- 1 Frontex is the European Union agency that oversees border security.
- 2 The Greek word for someone facilitating the movement of illegal migrants is ΔΟΥΛΕΜΠΟΡΟΣ and is made up of two words: ΔΟΥΛΟΣ or slave and ΕΜΠΟΡΟΣ or someone who is in trade.
- 4 Acquiring asylum status in Greece is very problematic. In 2007 Greece approved 0.04 % of its asylum requests, just eight cases out of 25,000 requests (EUbusiness Immigration, Greece, 2008).