“Economic practices of Greek diasporas from the Former Soviet Union: from the “return to eternal homeland” towards "eternal migration”?[1]

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In this paper we aim to discuss some preliminary results of a still ongoing research focusing on Greek “repatriates” from the former Soviet Union (FSU)[2]. In this research we study the development and transformation of the economic activities of the “repatriates” in the region of Thessaloniki. Along with studying how this population copes with subsistence and reproduction in the new geographic and social context we also aim to put into question linear concepts of migration, diasporas and national belonging. Thus, we focus on the way social diasporic networks shape economic networks and vice-versa. In this presentation we mainly discuss the role of recurrent mobility between countries in the context of economic strategies which seems to be important for a part of Greeks from the FSU. As we will try to show, strategies of mobility within borders challenges the linearity of the narrative of the so-called “return to the eternal homeland”, a narrative which was adopted by both the Greek authorities and by most of the “repatriates” themselves. At the same time, the complexity of the economic strategies and the role of the diasporic networks in them challenges the idea that Greek diaspora from the FSU should be regarded as a homogenous social group. Our research is based mainly on 15 semi-directed interviews of Greeks from the FSU along with fieldwork conducted by one of the researchers while working in a real estate company owned by a Greek “repatriate”.

The first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union more than 150.000 ethnic Greeks from several regions of the FSU migrated to Greece. A large part of them moved to Greece between 1990 and 1993 as part of mainly collectively decided migration, implicating family, kinship or generally local networks. Around 60% of all repatriates settled on the region of Macedonia - half of them on the city of Thessaloniki (Voutira, 2004) where our research focuses on. Thessaloniki is not only a city where an important part of “repatriates” from the FSU settled on but also is the center of business activities of some notable Greek businessmen from the FSU like Ivan Savvidis or Boris Mouzenidis.

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The migration practices we observed and especially those implicating wider networks seem to be in line with the findings of other scholars who work on Greek migration from the FSU. For example, E. Voutira underlined the importance of kinship networks in this procedure and a migration structure based on kinship relations that go beyond state borders (Voutira, 2006). Similar networks were revealed by Anton Popov, who focuses on the important role of the remittances sent back to Southern Russia, from FSU migrants after their repatriation and their following immigration to Cyprus, in the framework of a wider transnational circuit between three countries (Popov, 2016).

In our effort to explore the dynamics of the economic activity of FSU Greeks in the second major city of Greece, Thessaloniki, we came across many cases of migrating practices that were contrasting to the stereotypical (and very common in their own literature)[3] myth of Greece as the "eternal homeland", the final "patria". According to their own narratives, many Greeks from the FSU countries seem to be keener on recurrent mobility and migration rather than on definitive repatriation as an historical accomplishment. As we discovered in the course of our research, other countries than Greece were part of the life course of many of our repatriated informants. Germany and Cyprus were two of them, having a special place in their life trajectories.

Aristides, owner of a small mini market with Russian products in Thessaloniki's center admitted that just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, he preferred to migrate to Western Germany rather than Greece in order to start a new life. This choice was not accidental since the presence of relatives who helped him in the beginning was of key importance: FSU Greeks were orientated to cities where they already had relatives installed before them.

The main tendency for migrating abroad dates *after* the repatriation, namely before or during the "Greek crisis" period[4]. These last years, despite the cultural and economic particularities of their mobility patterns, FSU Greeks seem to be affected by similar migration practices to those of locals, such as the so-called brain drain. According to some of our informants, their children or grand-children choose to go in the UK or in Germany in order to study and work in high-skilled jobs. The son of Odysseas, an ex-worker in the construction department of a group of companies owned by an important Pontic Greek entrepreneur, works as an engineer in the global film industry. His father is very proud of his son who "earns a lot of money" and "is successful in his life", even if he lives away from home, in London. However, economic migration towards western countries is not limited in the new generation, those born in 1980's and 1990's, but sometimes constitute a general strategy against unemployment and underemployment in Greece.

Without any doubt, the bigger part of the massive flow of Greek FSU migrants who repatriated from 1990's to 2000's, remained in Greece, building up networks of economic,

[3] See the fiction section of the bibliography

[4] The public announcement of the necessity for a support mechanism in Greece by the ex- Prime Minister Giorgos Papandreou in Kastellorizo (23d April 2010) is considered as the official starting point of the country's a debt crisis. View link: http://www.kathimerini.gr/391375/article/epikairothta/politikh/anagkastikh-prosgeiwsh-sth-sklhrh-pragmatikothta

social and political relations. In many cases the mobility did not stop, but took the form of internal migration, from smaller cities or villages to Athens or Thessaloniki. Even if the national program for the settlement of the repatriates during the 90s promoted northern Greece and mainly rural areas for their installation, through policies of low-cost or free residencies, low interest loans, special facilities etc., there were many who migrated to big urban centers in order to search for better living conditions (Amitsis, 2001).

Nikos, a 30-year-old real estate agent, described his life trajectory as follows: his parents were forced to leave Tsalka's region in Georgia in 1992 when he was 2 years old. Their first settlement was in Pelion region, near Volos' city. After six years of living in miserable conditions in Khorevto and Zagora villages (his father was a bricklayer, her mother a cleaner), the family moved to Thessaloniki, where the chances to find a job where much greater. While his father worked as a trucker and bought their first house, Nikos moved to Germany, where he achieved to accumulate a small capital, enough to let him open a bar-club in the Greek city of Ioannina. However, when the crisis struck, he returned to Thessaloniki, where he started to work as a real estate agent, a professional activity that he follows until today.

Another category of repatriates juggled or still do, between Greece and the ex-soviet Republics. Except for those who lead businesses and crisscross borders, like the ex-shuttlers, fur traders etc., there are migrants who, disposing double passports, find seasonal or more temporary jobs in countries like Russia or Georgia. These migrants, often disappointed by the living conditions in Greece, started to feel nostalgic about the life they left in the former soviet republics and reconsidered their sentiments of belonging choosing at same cases to return back in their country of origin. In this way they constituted what Christin Hess describes as *reversed diasporic movements*, which due to their extension, deconstruct the myth of final destination to an historic homeland, which in our case, is Greece (Hess, 2008).

On the other hand, finding seasonal jobs in the previous countries of residence could be interpreted as a survival strategy, sometimes irrelevant to the desire of the migrant to choose its place of residence. When we met Eleni, during the summer of 2016, selling local goods in an open market outside the monastery of Novii Afon in the autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (she was 69 years old then), she acknowledged the necessity of this seasonal commercial activity in order to improve her living conditions in Thessaloniki. However, she admitted that if Thessaloniki was not her daughter's place of living, she would have already *returned* for the rest of her life to Abkhazia where most of her relatives remained. In contrast, the desire of another migrant, Olga, to stay in Greece, was undermined by the necessity to return to Russia, and specially to Sochi. Being heavily indebted, she was forced to reunite with her sister in 2012, who was never repatriated. In Sochi, where she still lives, Olga found eventually a better job. However, she expressed her desire to come back to Greece one day, since she has her own house, as well as friends who wait for her.

People who struggled to find affordable living conditions in Greece, returned to Russia, Georgia or other ex-URSS republics and started a new life from scratch, or were incorporated in their relative's work communities. Especially these categories of transnational migrants challenge the idea of Greece as the final destination, the "eternal

homeland", and call us to examine the economic terms of the dynamics of mobility, or even the degree in which, the economic factor embed migratory practices and shapes kinship networks, or the opposite.

Developing zones of mobility: Formal and informal practices of capital accumulation

Nearly all migration practices we registered, through the narratives of our informants, were rather triggered by the need of an improvement of their economic conditions, than by simple desires for a specific place of residence. The need for some sort of capital accumulation was often the defining element of mobility strategies. This capital which was needed either for survival purposes or for business investment, was accumulated inside mobility zones and through mainly informal practices[5], at least during the 1990's. Taking advantage of the conditions in Russian economy and the development of the merchant capitalism and the shuttle trade (Burawoy, 1999), as well as the poor border controls, many FSU Greeks bent on shuttle trade activity between Greece, Russia, Turkey and the countries of the Commonwealth. Inside Greece, small traders were selling their imported merchandise in open markets usually without permission, with the tolerance of Greek authorities.

Apart from the small trade in open markets, informal commercial networks were developed in other industries, where FSU Greeks could be useful thanks to their main skill which was no other than the knowledge of Russian language. The fur trade was one of them. The low cost - but good quality furs, that was the main exporting product of the city of Kastoria attracted a lot of Russian tourists in northern Greece. The missing gap was the staff who could mediate between the buyers and the producers. As FSU Greeks were on their vast majority Russophones, their involvement in that kind of trade was guaranteed. Working mainly with commissions (bonuses), the fur trade was for some a seasonal (summer) or a more temporary activity, based on informal payments. Dimitris, who among other jobs, was also a fur dealer reveals the well-organized albeit informal networks between fur producers, truckers, tourist agencies and dealers/sellers during 1990's:

"At that period, if I am not mistaken, […] nearly 180 fur boutiques opened just in Thessaloniki. Even a butcher would change his shop into a fur boutique. I mean that there were many who worked at this sector. But this was just for a specific period, until the moment when Russian market was saturated by consignments of furs … My job was to be among tourist agents and visit or steal clients in order to ensure my commission".

Dimitris, on account of his activity into fur trade, found later himself as a seller in Russia and Siberia, specially Krasnoyarsk. However, according to him, his involvement in that business started later than it should.

"The train had already left without me".

The co-existence of informal and formal practices in the framework of an economic zone between Greece and the former Soviet Republics is present in the narratives of other informants especially during 1990's. Sergios' life trajectory is a typical example of economic

[5] Some typical cases of informal economic practices can be found in Morris's and Polese (2014)

behavior of FSU migrants who crisscrossed borders accumulating skills, experiences and capital.

During the 1990's massive flow of repatriation, there were many who made a *preliminary visit* in Greece in order to examine the labor and social conditions, a trip that was necessary for making, eventually, the right decision. Sergios, born near Tsalka's Bestachen village (Georgia) in 1960, revealed that from 1993 to 1996 he used four times a touristic visa in order to come to Thessaloniki and work as a bricklayer (despite the fact he held an academic post in Moscow). The threefold low salaries – extended workdays – lack of social security, was a bad remembrance of his first summers in Thessaloniki. However, the small capital he accumulated, much more important than his salary as a professor in Moscow was used in order to buy his first goods, mostly tools for craftsmen, which he started selling in Turkish open markets. The abandon of a shuttle career very early and the meaningless efforts to survive in Moscow as an academic, lead him finally to settle for good in Thessaloniki in 1997. Thanks to his small experience in his seasonal job as bricklayer and specially curtain wall placement, he had quite a few propositions for work, which he accepted without hesitation until his recruitment into the public sector some years later. This last step of his professional career, which guaranties him a whole-life work stability, along with his involvement in syndicalist/political affairs of the repatriates[6], "tied" him with Thessaloniki, the very last point of his small odyssey.

The aforementioned work conditions that Sergios' described in his first visits in Thessaloniki, were even worse in small cities like Alexandroupoli, with high rates of unemployment, something that, as we wrote before, caused an internal migration from villages and small cities to Athens and Thessaloniki. As Symeon remembers, the reason he left Alexandroupoli, to which he arrived after the invitation of his sister, was the lack of stable work conditions and his reluctance to live just thanks to state allowances and some seasonal work, informally paid, as a bricklayer. His kinship network in Cyprus and Germany facilitated his decision to migrate to Larnaka, Nuremberg and Dusseldorf, where he worked for more than 10 years accumulating capital in order to buy an apartment in Thessaloniki, which was proved to be his hub with many comings and goings, just before taking definitely roots, some years ago. According to him, even if he moved to many places as a work migrant, his motivation was not "making business", "profit" or "speculate", but a "holier purpose", the necessity to "feed his family", as a "*kormitel' semi*"[7]. It is true that the 55-year old Symeon used Greece as an intermediate state, in order to travel to other EU countries, however, he had already decided, even before his migration, that he wanted to settle one day "in his historical homeland", where he could enjoy his social life, and feel better living. All these forms of capital accumulation, formal or informal, along with other strategies of symbolic or social capital increase (Sideri, 2015)- a question which goes beyond the goals of this paper, delimitate mobility zones developed on a transnational level, through different migration practices.

[6] He is the founder and the president of the Greek Federation of FSU migrants

[7] Family feeder in Russian

Conclusions

Through the cases of life trajectories of some of our informants we tried to examine critically linear visions of migration and notably the conception of the migration as a "return to the eternal homeland" by focusing on the economic strategies and practices of the Greeks from the FSU. In many cases Greece was not the final destination of migration as other countries seemed to be part of a transnational migration scheme. Although Greece constituted the most important part of their migration course, several Greeks from the FSU migrated to other countries before or after migrating to Greece. Following economic strategies and mostly through kinship networks, transnational mobility played a significant role in life trajectories after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. At some cases even, this transnational mobility is part of entrepreneurial activities and strategies of capital accumulation. In this way, migration courses and life trajectories and economic activities and strategies are intrinsically tied. Therefore, the way Greeks from the FSU conceive migration to Greece as a return to the homeland is affected by economic necessities and strategies. But at the same time the latter often depend by diasporic networks. As economic activities are embedded in kinship or ethnic networks and/or common language, they can be affected as well by movements, mobilities and mutations of these networks.

Because of the complex role of economic practices and strategies in life trajectories, Greeks from the FSU should not be considered as a homogenous group which hence has a common conception of Greece as a final destination and homeland. As we tried to show through our informants' narratives some of them kept considering Greece as their actual home. Even though many of them experienced extended mobility and recurrent migration they regarded Greece and Thessaloniki as their desired place to live. For others, often disillusioned by the actual material conditions they met instead of the idealized image of the symbolic homeland, Greece was rather a step only within a quite fluid life trajectory which sometimes led even to a return to Russia or Georgia. Thus, different professional trajectories and available economic (or symbolic) capital and networks can lead to different conceptions of belonging and vice versa.

Though the exact way economic activities and mobility interact with conceptions of migration and homeland would require some further research in order to identify potential patterns within the Greeks from the FSU, existing material suggests that despite the narratives of return, Greek diaspora from the FSU is characterized by fluidity and differentiation, often similar to these of the local population.

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