Narratives on Migration

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Greece has a long tradition of welcoming collective attitude towards foreigners since the ancient times. The word "philoxenia" is Greek, meaning that foreigners are considered as friends. This mentality was reflected even to the name of Zeus, the all father of the Olympic Pantheon, was called "Xenios", being among other the protector of aliens.

Greeks were spread all over the world during the ancient and modern times, looking for new opportunities and in times of economic recession for making a better living.

In the 70s and following the dismantlement of the USSR and abolishment of the communist regimes in the Balkans and the Eastern Europe, Greece has become for the first time a receiving country for hundred of thousands irregular migrants originating in their great majority from the neighboring Albania and in smaller numbers from Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Poland and Bulgaria.

The main pull factor for the newcomers was the prosperity and development of the country, its ability to create new jobs and vacancies in certain sectors of the national economy, such as in agriculture, building, catering, care giving etc.

Given that Greece had neither a recruitment policy for foreign workers and, consequently, nor a migration policy in place, migration management fell under the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Order.

As far as integration measures are concerned, Greece has followed the typical southern "self-integration" model. Narratives on migration at this period linked the massive presence of migrants with the increased level of criminality in the country.

The migration–criminality nexus was due to the repressive (anti-migration) policy that the Greek state adopted at that time which was characterized by a) the lack of legal channels for migrants, b) the criminalization of irregular migration and c) the Public Order Forces (Police) put in charge of migration management.

A vicious circle has facilitated the negative narratives of this first period: in the absence of legal channels, all migrants were irregular and by the Law illegal. They were persecuted by the Police, put in jail and deported. As a consequence were overrepresented to the criminal statistics, simply because of their illegal border crossing. The press and the mass media played dirty with the atavistic fears of addressing to a public, proud of its national homogeneity and faced with territorial claims by its neighbors throughout its modern history. Migrants were presented as invaders, trouble makers and more often than not as criminals or potential ones, disrupting the citizen's orderly life by their behavior, if not by their own presence. In the police broadcasting, when a migrant had committed even a petty crime, the focus was put on their origin rather than on the motivation, nature or extenuating circumstances.

A gender based negative narrative, disseminated by the media and wide spread through rumors and storytelling among natives targeted young women from the ex Soviet union, known as "Natasha syndrome". In its worse option, these women were prostitutes, looking for easy moneymaking. The "best" one referred to them as "male hunters" often under the coverage of care giving to elderly natives, leading up to marriage, a sine qua non condition for their legalization and a secure future ahead. Given the shortage of men in the country, the presence of young, beautiful and "exotic" young women ready to play the role of the traditional housewife in contrast with the feminist approach of Greek women, contributed to the myth according to "migrant women are stilling our men/ potential husbands".

Minors were not excluded from negative narratives. Migrants pupils were considered having a negative impact to the overall school achievement, given that they were facing linguistic problems, as non-native speakers in conjunction with a lack of supportive family and social environment.

Although, according to informal data for the primary and secondary education, an important number of migrant pupils were successful in their exams, the bad reputation of public schools with high concentration of migrant pupils persists against facts. Native parents tried to avoid mingling their children with foreign born peers often on ethical and cultural grounds.

The changing migration profile in the course of the last decade on the top of the economic crisis that affected the country marked a turning point to the above mentioned narrative which has been negative but not really xenophobic or racist.

At a first stage, migrants originating from Africa and Asia started to massively crossing the Greek borders irregularly. We must point out at this point that the great majority of the early migrants were legalized through three consecutive procedures and were well integrated in the Greek society both in terms of access to the labor market, to the national education system and in general to the Greek way of life. While the first comers were smoothly adapted to the Greek society, the same held true for the narrative on migration, at least in the private sphere of every discussion and on a personal basis, for individual workers and colleagues who were in close contact with natives at the work places. It should be noted that the public discourse on migration resisted this tendency and the political statements as well as media reports kept a rather anti-migrant attitude leading to a "schizophrenic" double narrative.

A turning point for the evaluation of narrative on migration at all levels was a three-folded internal and external that the country faced in the course of the last seven years.

The migration profile of newcomers has dramatically changed in terms of national, cultural and skills' background. Asian and African countries have become the main source countries of irregular migrants. Their arrival coincided with the break out of the economic crisis with high rates of unemployment and the elimination of many low skilled jobs.

On the top of this, an unprecedented number of mixed flows of asylum seekers mainly reached the Greek coast line and islands in the aftermath of civil wars in Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq (more than 1 million and a half transited Greece in 2015-2016).

Although only about 65.000 were 'trapped' in the country after borders' closing down by our northern neighbors, the burden for Greece, hosting already about 650.000 regular and an unknown number of irregular migrants, was heavy and difficult to tackle.

The respond to the humanitarian crisis of asylum seekers from the Greek civil society through volunteering, was amazing, taking into consideration the economic recession, but the overall situation as described above had a very negative impact on migration narratives. Xenophobia and racism as well as anti-migrant discourse were voiced by both the political populist parties (not only the 'Golden Dawn' which entered later on the National Parliament) and a significant part of the mass media and of the public opinion.

To the myths about criminality, immorality/prostitution of young female migrants and low school achievement of migrant children were added these related to economic, cultural and security issues, the latter closely linked to culture (radical Islamists) and to the recent terroristic attacks in European capitals and cities.

An indicative list of these myths, well known in West: "Migrants are stealing our jobs", "Migrants put at risk our social security system because they do not pay taxes", "Migrants are abus-

ing health system and leave no place for natives in the public hospitals", "Muslim migrants have high birth rates and they represent a danger to demographic balance and the religious national identity of the Greek population", "Muslim men are violating women human rights (child/forced marriage, imposed dress codes and attitudes reducing their fundamental freedoms)", "Muslim population cannot be integrated in the Greek society because it cannot adopt the European values", "African and Asian migrants are lazy, unskilled and often involved in illegal activities".

The narrative about migrants (and less often about asylum seekers, considered as uprooted by wars and violence and forced to migrate) include story-telling about migrants 'invading" the country by massive inflows "occupying" certain parts of the capital, creating enclaves/ghettos, where normal citizens cannot circulate in the evening, about migrants suffering of diseases (tuberculosis, AIDS etc) dangerous for the public health, so on so forth.

Activities with a view to change the negative narrative on migration

The Greek governments have initiated a series of activities (within the European Integration Fund) targeting the improvement/change of narratives on migration including:
- tailor-made seminars for journalists and people working for the media
- the elaboration of a handbook on good practices (articles, reports, TV and radio broadcasting, etc) in the Press and the Media dealing with migration issues
- awareness raising campaigns on the added value of diversity
- intercultural training courses for civil servants and people dealing with migrants at local level
- radio broadcasting seminars and emissions by young migrants on mainstreaming youth problems, success stories and migrants' activities (volunteering, sport activities, etc)
- anti-racist seminars in schools with a view to sensitization of native pupils against racism and xenophobia
- Joint activities of migrants and natives at local level (biking, cloth-making, gardening, art products from recycled objects so on so forth).

How to make narratives work for migration

Narratives of migration are based more than often to assumptions, prejudice, preoccupation, lack of knowledge and data, misunderstanding within communication/relations due to cultural differences and power dynamics, involving emotional invocation, playing on the feeling of fear of the other and ready-made conclusions.

Mentalities are forged through education, early (within family) and secondary socialization (schooling and peer groups), mass/electronic media as well as through political institutions and public dialogue.

What is really missing, in our understanding, is the elaboration of an overall strategy of communication which will include, among others:

I) Education
1. History of emigration and immigration as part of the history courses in the school curricula of the receiving countries.
2. Introduction of culture and art courses from other civilizations, their interconnections and mutual influences.

3. Extension of school libraries with books (romance, poetry, etc) from non-western countries translated in the language of the country as well as in the original languages.
4. Introduction of innovative video games with a multicultural content.
5. Extension of students' exchange programs and volunteering in summer vacations to sending countries.

II) Intercultural Dialogue and Mediation
1. The use of intercultural mediation both for the new comers and established migrants to prevent misunderstanding and misinterpretations between national and local authorities, service providers and migrants.
2. The set up of e-platforms, the organization of join meetings and activities and the creation of common spaces for dialogue and promotion of mutual understanding on cultural and religious issues.
3. The set up of an Immigration/Emigration Museum.
4. The set up of mixed Youth Centers in quarters with high concentration of migrants in the cities and communities providing opportunities to explore and share common interests.

III) Awareness raising at national and local level
1. Awareness raising campaigns through the mainstream media, presenting famous persons and successful businessman, artists, athletes etc with a migrant background (short stories or snapshots of their activities, awards, etc).
2. Awareness raising campaigns through face to face joint meetings, festivities, concerts, volunteering activities etc as well as through local media campaigns and press.

IV) Combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination
1. Set up an Observatory on these issues with a view to map incidents, high risk target groups, regions and social/political groups prominent to racist activities, violence, hate speech, etc.
2. Set up of a red line and a multilingual front desk service for the registration of xenophobic and racist incidents and cases of discrimination.
3. Assign an Ombudsman, on issues of racism, xenophobia and discrimination.
4. Providing training to police officers and judges on these issues.

V) Dealing with mass media (e-press/press)
1. Hire journalists of migrant origin in the mainstream media and press.
2. Include in the TV/Radio Channels special programs with interviews, reports on data concerning migration, publications of reports /research on migrants' productivity, business and commercial activities, artistic creation, etc.
3. Facilitate the set up of alternative media/press management by migrants and citizens of foreign background with a view to present their own approach to migration/development and to have their own voice to be heard.

VI) Leadership programs
1. Launch leadership programs for migrants and persons with a migrant background aiming at getting acquainted qualifications with the procedures and acquiring specific skills as community/associations leaders, elected members of the City Councils and/or of Parliament.
2. Undertake leadership programs for migrant women or citizens with a migrant background and youth at business, community and political level.

VII) Participation in all sectors of public life (social, economic, cultural and civic)
1. Promote civil courses to all migrants and provide information on how to become active members of the Civil Society or citizens in case of the so-called second and third generation migrants.
2. Facilitate their participation to workers unions, mixed associations at local or national level on issues of education (parents associations), quality of environment, social care, etc.

VIII) Finance and promote research on migrants' biographies, on communication dysfunctions (including rumors, e-press), on racism, on mapping negative attitudes and problems to be tackled with a view to proceed to a knowledge based change of narratives on migration, in order to become tools for migration management and integration policy change.