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### Invest the city by doing businesses: Geographies of migrant entrepreneurs in the center of Athens

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Invest the city by doing businesses: Geographies of migrant entrepreneurs in the  
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ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to describe the geographies of migrant entrepreneurship in Athens from the scale of the municipality to the street level. The purpose of this multiscalar approach is to explore two main issues: firstly, to investigate the location of enterprises by nationality at the scale of the municipality and, secondly, to analyse the sociospatial practices in starting up and running a business within the particular urban context of three areas of Athens, the years following the economic recession. The paper is based on a research program conducted at the French School at Athens from 2015 to 2017.*

Keywords: *Athens, entrepreneurship, social and spatial practices, urban change*

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*Τρις Πολύζου*

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Επενδύοντας στην πόλη μέσω επιχειρηματικών δραστηριοτήτων: Γεωγραφίες της  
μεταναστευτικής επιχειρηματικότητας στο κέντρο της Αθήνας

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#### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

*Σκοπός του άρθρου είναι η μελέτη της μεταναστευτικής επιχειρηματικότητας στην Αθήνα, από την κλίμακα του δήμου σε αυτήν του δρόμου. Η προσέγγιση του ζητήματος μέσα από διαφορετικές χωρικές κλίμακες στοχεύει στην ανάδειξη δύο θεματικών: πρώτον, στη συσχέτιση μεταξύ τόπου εγκατάστασης και χώρα προέλευσης των επιχειρηματιών στην Αθήνα και, δεύτερον, στην ανάλυση των χωροκοινωνικών πρακτικών που επιτρέπουν την εγκατάσταση και λειτουργία των εν λόγω επιχειρήσεων εντός του συγκεκριμένου πλαισίου τριών κεντρικών περιοχών, τα χρόνια που έπονται της οικονομικής κρίσης. Το άρθρο βασίζεται σε ερευνητικό πρόγραμμα που υλοποιήθηκε στην Γαλλική Σχολή Αθηνών μεταξύ 2015 και 2017.*

*Λέξεις κλειδιά: Αθήνα, αστικοί μετασχηματισμοί, επιχειρηματικότητα, χωρικές και κοινωνικές πρακτικές,*

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Migrant entrepreneurship is a relatively recent component of the Athenian urban fabric since it is interrelated with migratory flows over the last couple of decades. Thus, while at the end of the 1990s migrant entrepreneurs came mostly from the former East European countries and the Balkans, by the mid-2000s, there has been a significant diversification in the countries of origin of entrepreneurs, as a result of mobility from Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The Labour Force Survey for the third quarter of 2015 estimates the number of self-employed people of migrant background, with or without employees, at 33.545 for the country as a whole. In the municipality of Athens, according to the registers of the two main chambers of commerce (the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Athens Chamber of Tradesmen), more than 108 different countries of origin are recorded, along with a diverse number of sectors of economic activity where people of migrant origin are employed (STAKOD codes).<sup>2</sup>

Taking into account the multiple effects of the economic recession that has scarred the city since 2010, this article investigates whether migrant entrepreneurship “resists” and adapts to the particular sociospatial dynamics that are being shaped in the second half of the 2010s. Moreover, by focusing on the spaces of working and doing businesses, it aims to further analyse the interrelation of migrant settlement with processes of urban change taking place in Athens. The key question is how the entrepreneurship of migrants adapts to the sociospatial context of Athens and, vice versa, how it influences it.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was based on analysis and mapping of quantitative data, as well as on field research that included a field survey and semi-structured interviews with traders and employees of the businesses being studied. The field research was conducted from 2015 to 2017 and focused on three areas in central Athens: Omonia Square and the area of Gerani, Viktorias Square and Acharnon Street, and Amerikis Square and the area of Kypseli.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a research programme of the French School at Athens (Ecole française d’Athènes) and is part of the five-year research planning period 2017-2021. It was implemented by a four-member research team consisting of Semia Samara (PhD University of Nanterre), Dimitris Balabanidis (PhD Harokopio University), Stavros Spyrellis (PhD University of Paris I) and Loukas Triantis (PhD NTUA). The design and coordination of the research programme was carried out by the author of this article. An earlier version of this article is published in Polyzou, 2018, while the editing of the text in English was provided by Texto Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> The Statistical Classification of Economic Activities (STAKOD) is used by the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) and allows businesses to be classified by sector.

Specifically, the survey and interviews were conducted in 30 streets in the above areas. Those streets were chosen according to the density of migrant businesses that emerged from the mapping of the quantitative data, as issued by the main commercial chambers. Proximity to main roads, squares and public transport also contributed to the delimitation of the field area. The scale of the street, as the primary unit of the field survey, allowed for a deeper investigation of the everyday practices, social interactions, conflicting narratives and representations that take place at the micro-scale (Kaftantzoglou, 2013; Hall, 2013; Zukin, Kasinitz and Chen, 2016).

Interviews with entrepreneurs from a migrant background lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and were based on an open interview guide whose main strands were the migrant journey from the country of origin to Athens, the relations with the specific place of work, the career trajectory, how the recent financial crisis affected them and about their future aspirations. The interview sample consisted of 55 people of more than 21 countries of origin. The majority of the interviewees originated from Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, China), from East European countries (Albania, Georgia, Poland), from the Middle East (Egypt and Syria), and from a host of African countries (Ethiopia, Nigeria, etc.). Interviews with Greek shopkeepers and employees followed the same structure and highlighted their narratives concerning the city and its recent transformations.

## 1. ISSUES OF CONTEXTUALISATION

### 1.1. *Theoretical context*

Migrant's settlement in "host" cities is often studied in terms of social, economic and cultural integration (Afouxenidis, Sarris and Tsakiridi, 2012). This approach to integration is primarily looked at in relation to the country and the society where migrants settle. A society which is assumed to be a single and homogenous entity. The most fundamental criticism of this approach argues against the "methodological nationalism" produced by academics themselves in their attempt to analyse unilaterally migrant's integration within the host society (Wimmer, Glick-Schiller, 2002; Vaiou *et.al.*, 2007). The approach followed in this article attempts to overcome this ethnocentric view, by emphasizing on the social and spatial practices of entrepreneurs and employees as a whole.

Moreover, this study analyses migrant's settlement as an open process which could be studied through the concept of social, spatial and economic trajectories. This concept allows focusing on contemporary mobilities beyond the boundaries of the nation state, as the primary unit of reference. It emphasises the fact that mobility begins from the country of origin – often

after internal migration – and extends socially and spatially in the places of temporary or more permanent presence. In other words, mobility is constituted within an extended spatial and temporal migratory field (Simon, 2008).

The concept of the trajectory also draws attention on migrants' agency as a dominant factor that shapes and reshapes the social, professional and spatial settlement in the city. By privileging an approach that recognizes the social and political autonomy that shapes contemporary mobilities, this study aims to identify social and spatial practices through personal preferences, strategies, and future aspirations. At the same time, the analysis of migrants' agency sheds light to the constraints and limitations that arise from the social and economic structures of the host city (Ma Mung, 1999; Green, 2002; Marvakis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos, 2006; Polyzos, 2017).

In line with the above theoretical approaches, migrants' settlement as independent entrepreneurs is perceived both as an outcome of personal choices and decisions and as a way to cope with the structural inequalities of the labor market (Kapsalis, 2018).

## **1.2. Athens' sociospatial context**

Migrants' entrepreneurial activities are analysed within the particular context of the Athenian urban space during the years 2015-2016. As noted by the large majority of scholars, Athens maintains an important social and ethnic diversity among its population (among others, Vaiou *et al.*, 2007; Maloutas, 2008). The current socio-spatial context is related to historical processes of urbanization, and the subsequent inflow of population, during the post-war decades (Maloutas *et al.*, 2012, pp. 257-260). *Antiparochi*, the well known mechanism behind the construction of the Athenian apartment blocks, not only functioned as a factor of income redistribution (Mantouvalou and Mavridou, 1995, pp. 192), but also prevented social polarisation (Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001, pp. 704; Maloutas and Spyrellis, 2015). The settlement of international migrants in the 1990s, in already socially mixed areas, enhanced new social and economic dynamics, at the local scale, and amplified ethnic diversification in certain neighbourhoods (Balampanidis and Polyzos, 2016, pp. 87-88).

During the recent economic recession, the established yet fragile coexistences in those central areas were put at stake. The effects of the declining GNP and the subsequent reduction of the domestic consumption capacity, along with rising unemployment rates, aggravated the everyday working and living conditions for a large part of the city's inhabitants. Regarding the working conditions of the migrant population, data by the Labour Force Survey show that their unemployment rate is significantly higher in comparison to the total population.

Specifically, according to analysis by Papadopoulos and Fratsea (2010:82), in 2012, 35 % of migrants were unemployed against 24 % of Greek nationals.

In Athens, the suburbanisation trends, recorded already during the early 1980s (Maloutas, 2000, p. 28), were substantiated by the declining population of the city: according to the last national census, from 2001 to 2011, the capital seemed to have lost 81,468 inhabitants (ELSTAT, 2014). Moreover, during the most critical years of the economic recession, more than 27% of stores and services, both in central streets and in less commercial parts of the city, were recorded as closed (ESEE-INEMY, 2015). This phenomenon, which emphatically visualised the economic recession at the street level, affected a great variety of retail commercial stores, such as clothing, accessories, home furnishing, food stores and others. At the political level, central areas of Athens were also experiencing the rise of xenophobic attitudes, primarily produced by mainstream media and extreme right political entities (Koutrolikou, 2015, p. 181). Migrants' presence became synonym with phenomenon of urban criminality (Kandylis, 2013, pp. 257-258), while, at the same time, the debate concerning the ghettoization of those areas were ongoing. It is within this particular context, in the years following the surge of the economic recession that the present article aims to investigate migrants' entrepreneurial geographies and their impact on the city's dynamics.

## 2. GEOGRAPHIES OF MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ATHENS

### ***2.1. Location of migrant entrepreneurship in the municipality of Athens***

By analysing and mapping the businesses registered in the two main commercial chambers, the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Athens Chamber of Tradesmen (ACT), it was possible to examine the correlation of the location of businesses by nationality with trends of ethnic and social segregation trends of Athens' central areas.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the classification of entrepreneurs on the basis of the nationality, as stated in the registers of the commercial chambers, is open to criticism. The formation of broad categories on the basis of countries of origin obscures the complex ethnic and social identities that are constantly reshaped. In this regard, the data collected from field research attempted to make up for this deficiency and to critically approach issues of ethnic identity (Fox and Jones, 2013, p. 385).

According to the ACCI register for 2015,<sup>3</sup> 2.057 businesses were owned by foreign citizens, while the ACT register records 8.899 businesses within the limits of the municipality of Athens:

Table 1: Groupings of countries of origin by number of businesses

Classification	Number of businesses (ACCI)	Number of businesses (ACT)
European countries	1.044	1.470
USA and Canada	72	109
Balkan and East European countries	357	5128
Asian countries	292	1002
Middle Eastern countries	189	532
African countries	103	567
Other countries	18	91
Total	2.057	8.899

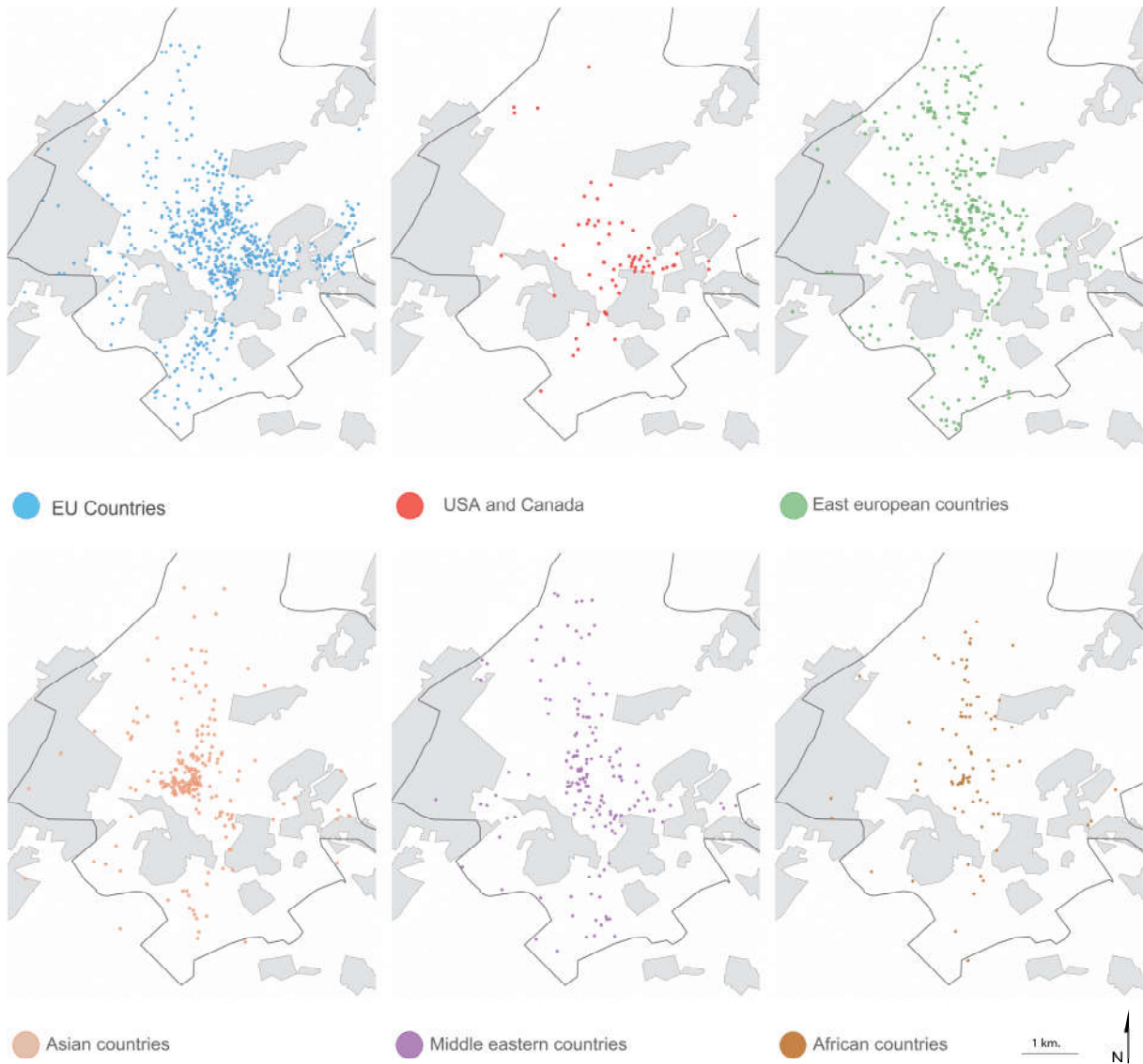
Source: ACCI and ACT, 2015.

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<sup>3</sup> Although these chambers have a large number of members, the data have certain shortcomings: registration with a chamber is not obligatory and some of the businesses that have closed continue to be listed in the registers. Also, for mapping purposes, the individual nationalities of the traders have been classified in broad geographical categories.



Map 1: Distribution of entrepreneurship in the municipality of Athens by nationality



Source: ACCI, 2015, cartography by S.N. Spyrellis.

The above spatial distribution of businesses owned by foreign nationals by nationality means that the following issues can be further investigated:

The first confirms the well-known segregation trends between the western and eastern neighborhoods of the municipality (Arapoglou, Maloutas, 2011; Kandylis, Maloutas and Sayas, 2012). In particular, the available data show that the businesses of migrants are dispersed but their majority is clearly located in western Athens. Specifically, the majority of businesses of nationals of Balkan and East European countries are concentrated in the area around Omonia Square, particularly the three squares of Karaiskaki, Vathis and Attikis. Businesses of Chinese, Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals and those of other Asian countries

are located in the Omonia/Gerani area, part of Metaxourgio, and dispersed in areas west of Patisision Street. Businesses of migrants from Middle Eastern countries (Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, etc) are located in the city centre and west of Patisision Street. Regarding entrepreneurs from African countries, there is a greater concentration in the area of Kypseli and Amerikis Square, which was also confirmed by the field survey. By contrast, the businesses of nationals from the EU and North America are located in eastern Athens, especially in the areas of Kolonaki, Evangelismos, Pangrati, Ilisia, either side of Vasilisis Sofias Avenue, Panepistimiou Street, Akadimias Street and Stadiou Street.

The settlement of the great majority of migrant traders in the western part of the city centre appears, therefore, to follow the social and ethnic geography of the city. This specific geography of migrants' businesses is not only due to low rents and significant percentages of available commercial spaces, but also due to the residential patterns followed by the migrant population, according to data of the last national Census (Maloutas and Spyrellis, 2015).

The second issue arising from this spatial distribution concerns the binary opposition concentration/dispersal of businesses at the level of the municipality. So while there is a concentration of businesses in the city centre, a significant dispersal of shops is also recorded across a wider section of the municipality of Athens. The location of businesses in the centre underlines the role it continues to play as a central purchase and supply point for a considerable share of the migrant population (and not only). It should also be noted that this typology of locations is also related to the type of businesses, since migrants' wholesale trade is almost exclusively located in the city centre and serves the needs of a supralocal clientele, while the local retail trade tends to follow residential patterns and to be dispersed in the city's neighborhoods.

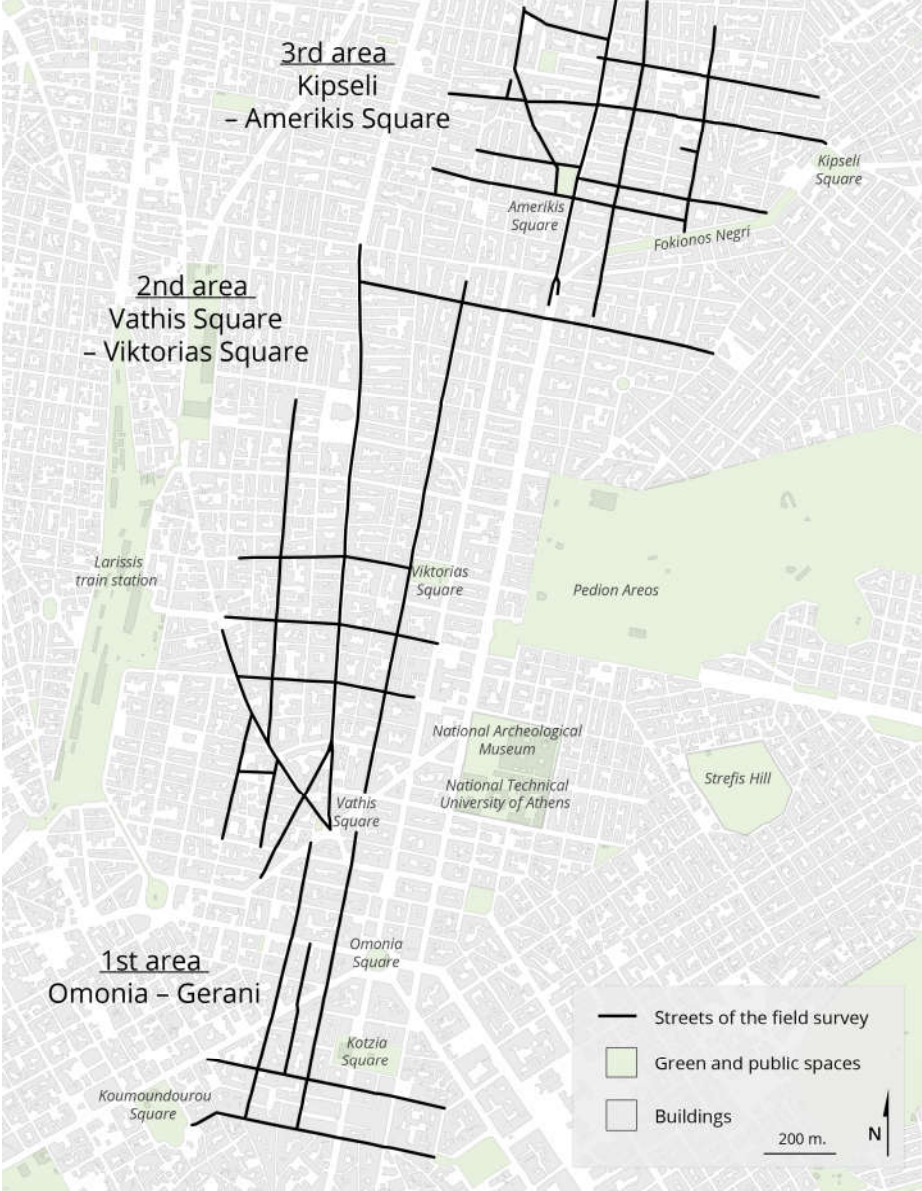
A third issue arising from the above data is the large variety of businesses developed by the migrant entrepreneurs. This includes predominantly retail clothes, food and electronics shops, money-transfer services, travel agencies, hair salons and restaurants. It could be argued that the data produced by the field survey put in question this strict classification of types of businesses. As we shall see below, the products and services provided by those enterprises are much more diverse and adaptable to the demand of their clientele.

## ***2.2. Investigating migrant entrepreneurship at the street-scale***

In order to identify the personal and professional trajectories followed by migrant traders in establishing their businesses, the present study is based on *in situ* research that involved a field survey of the businesses and semi-structured interviews with employees and owners on

selected streets in three areas in the centre of Athens: (1) Omonia Square and the area of Gerani, (2) Vathis Square and Viktorias Square, (3) Amerikis Square and the area of Kypseli.

Map 2: Delimitation of the field survey within the municipality of Athens



Source: Polyzos (2017b), cartography by S.N. Spyrellis.

Of the 30 streets where the field survey was conducted, 2.362 businesses were counted, of which 730 had gone out of business (30%) and 1.622 were operating normally. Of those businesses that remained opened, 1.083 belong to Greeks and 498 to migrants (30%).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For each open shop, the following data were collected: address, company name, in or out of business, nationality, clientele, type of activity, specialised products, number of employees, and public space appropriation practices.

The first area, Omonia and the area of Gerani, extending from Omonia Square and Athinas Street to Pireos Street and is bordered by Koumoundourou Square, is predominantly commercial with a high degree of supra-local and wholesale trade. On Sofokleous Street, on Evripidou Street and on their side-streets, Menandrou Street and Geraniou Street, entrepreneurship is widespread, with more than 200 shops belonging to traders of 14 different nationalities. The three predominant countries of origin are Pakistan, China and Bangladesh. Shopkeepers from Pakistan invest in retail clothing or accessories' shops, as well as in shops specialising in selling and repairing of electronic devices. Among Chinese shopkeepers, retail and wholesale of footwear, accessories and clothes predominate. Migrants from Bangladesh specialise on food stores, and mostly on small grocery stores that require limited start-up capital. It should be noted that the clientele of those activities is mixed: food shops and electronics shops serve people from the same ethnic background and migrants of other nationalities, while the wholesale outlets of Chinese migrants mainly target Greek retailers.

In the second area, Vathis Square and Viktorias Square, the key roads that were studied were Michail Voda Street, Acharnon Street, and their side-streets. Around Vathis Square, traders come predominantly from East European countries, especially Bulgaria and Poland. On the other hand, the concentration of migrant businesses around Viktorias Square, Acharnon and Aristotelous Street is more recent and significantly more diverse: shops owners are mainly from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Middle Eastern countries. Perhaps the most significant difference in comparison to the case of Omonia Square is that the shops and services in this second area mainly target a local clientele. Moreover, as we shall analyse later on, the businesses located in the area redefined their supply in order to respond to the new clientele of refugees and migrants that were in transit the years 2015-2016.

The third area investigated in this study starts at Amerikis Square and extends as far as the pedestrianised Agias Zonis Street in Kypseli: the migrants' entrepreneurship in this area is spatially more dispersed, while the sizeable concentrations of the first two areas are not observed. Empty shops occupy a significant part of the streets studied, while neighborhood trade predominates with most businesses targeting a mixed clientele residing in the area. The main countries of the shop-owners' origin are Pakistan, Nigeria and Bulgaria. What is particular about this area is a high presence of shopkeepers from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Nigeria (Petronoti, 2007).

The field survey showed that the development of migrant entrepreneurship differs in the three areas according to the nationality, the type of businesses and the targeted clientele. The specific urban context, the rents of stores, the proximity to public transport, as well as the

proximity to a residential neighborhood are, among others, crucial factors that shape the specific characteristic of migrants' economic activities in each area. A common characteristic among the studied areas is the significant share of closed-down businesses: while in the area near Omonia Square, closed businesses account only for 19 % of the total, in Kypseli area they are 37 %, surpassing the average for closed businesses recorded by the ESEE-INEMY for 2015. Taking into account the negative impact of the economic recession on the commercial fabric of the city centre, the presence of migrants as entrepreneurs in the above areas is becoming more than crucial.

### 3. SOCIOSPATIAL PRACTICES

#### **3.1. *Urban changes as an outcome of migrants' economic activities***

The interviews conducted with traders and employees allow for a better understanding of the social and spatial practices employed or exercised in the specific context of the above-mentioned areas. One issue has to do with the spatial and social changes triggered by migrant entrepreneurs. In fact, in Gerani, the density of businesses and the gradual creation of a distinct market with an extensive clientele led to a significant increase of the demand for commercial spaces. This is even more observable in specific streets, such as Sofokleous, Evripidou or Menandrou. According to an interview conducted with an accountant based in the area, when a shop closes down it is immediately reopened (interview extract, 2015, Nikos, Greece, Anaxagorou street, accounting office).

A complementary factor for understanding the way migrants' shops and services functioned as vehicles for sociospatial change is linked to the intensive renovation of these commercial rented spaces. Indeed, according to a number of interviewees, in the 90s these are shops were empty for a long time before migrant entrepreneurs took them over. The stores required extensive maintenance which, for the most cases, was carried out by the renters themselves: *“in 1999 all the shops were shut, there was nothing here. If you'd seen my shop then, it was in a terrible condition. I changed everything inside: the electricity meter, the tiles on the floor, I fixed the attic... The shop was very old and had been shut up for years. From 20.000 drachmas, the rent went up to 1.200 euros. I paid a lot. [...] In 2002-2003, things were going really well, shops were opening”* (interview extract, 2015, Ali, owner, India, Menandrou Street, money exchange).

Moreover, migrants' presence in the area is also related to the high rent prices, especially before the 2010 economic recession: *“As soon as shops began to open in the area, the rents went up. In the beginning, it costed nothing to have a shop here. By 2000, the rent*

was 1.000 euros, while from 2005 to 2010 we were paying 4.000 euros. If you wanted to change shops, you also had to pay the owner for the “air” [the reputation] of the shop” (Interview extract, 2013, Liu, owner, China, Pireos Street, wholesale women’s clothes). As it can be seen from a number of interviews, the 2010 crisis had a negative impact on the turnover of shops, resulting in negotiations with the owners of the properties for lower rents. Yet despite these difficulties, Gerani (in comparison to the areas of Viktorias and Kipseli area) managed to keep its role as a central place to shop. Thus, rents remained significantly higher, even in the harsher years of the economic recession.

The settlement and investments of migrant traders in those central areas put in question the prevailing perceptions of ghettoisation, as well as the association of migrants’ presence with aspects of urban decline (Koutrolikou, 2015; Balampanidis and Polyzos, 2016). According to Hari, established since 1998 in the area, the anti-migrant narrative was mostly the result of the post 2010-2012 political and economic context. As he stated, the arrival of Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants in the area of Sokratous in 1996 wasn’t perceived as negative, *“in the contrary, the area had already a bad reputation. At that time, a single woman couldn’t cross the area. They was drug trafficking, prostitution, among other types of illegal traffickings”* (interview extract, 2016, Hari, owner, Bangladesh, Evripidou Street, retail commerce).

### **3.2. Local/global interconnections**

The next issue arising from the semi structured interviews concerns the links between the local and the global scale. The existence and operation of enterprises was largely based on social and economic networks beyond the borders of the country and extending both to places of origin and to other migrant destinations. Thus transnational links from and to the centre of Athens were intensified, bringing to the fore the “globality of the local” (Massey, 1994). According to Smith (2005), these networks call into question prevailing social and ethnic relationships and leave open the possibility of multiple links between places, economic flows and social interactions.

The case of a Bangladeshi owner of a food shop on Geraniou Street reflects the above discussion and can be interpreted in the light of the “globality” of the local. In order to meet the needs of his wide-ranging clientele and at the same time to reduce his business costs, he relies on different supply networks inside and outside the country. He imports products such as rice and spices from Dubai, buys paper and personal hygiene products from a wholesaler in Attiki, who in turn buys them from international chains of supermarkets and, finally, gets

fresh fruit and vegetables from a Bangladeshi grower in Marathonas (interview extract, Safir, owner, Bangladesh, Geraniou street, mini market). Moreover, the large majority of Chinese wholesalers that establish their supply chain on networks that connect their area of settlement to both transnational commercial routes in China and in Europe, complements the local/global interconnections that structure migrants' business initiatives (Polyzos, 2014).

Another example that illustrates the interconnections of migrants' businesses with networks of global and local economic relations is the travel agency and money transfer enterprise of Namur, established in Geraniou street (interview extract, Namur, owner, India, Geraniou street, money transfer and travel agency). While serving the needs of the migrant clientele he is, at the same time, providing services to an Indian middle and upper income clientele that visits Greece, its capital and its islands. The local/global interconnections upon which Namur has built his enterprise provide him with a considerable advantage. On the one hand, this example puts in question dominant perceptions on migrants' marginal economic activities. On the other hand, it underlines that migrant economies participate in what Glick-Schiller and Caglar (2013) define as the repositioning of the host cities to the global scale.

### ***3.3. Adaptabilities within the current economic crisis***

A third issue relating to the business practices employed in order to cope with the economic recession that adversely affected the retail activities of the city. Let us underline that during the field work, the percentage of closed stores in the city center was estimated at 27,5% (ESEE-INEMY, 2015). A high percentage that is certainly associated to the low domestic consumption of those years.

According to the analysis of Hatziprokopiou and Frangopoulos (2015), the impact of the crisis on migrant entrepreneurship may be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it is emphasized as a negative factor obstructing the development of entrepreneurship among migrants and, on the other hand, as an alternative in order to deal with high unemployment in the labor market. Accordingly, a number of interviewees that were established as entrepreneurs before 2010-2012, mentioned that the crisis had an immediate impact to the downsizing of their clientele. On the opposite, the example of Sami, from Egypt, who worked as a painter until 2011 and then decided to spend everything he had on opening a mini-market in 2012, converges with the second approach. Since the construction sector had been badly hit, the economic recession functioned as a catalyst for entering the independent economic activities. We could conclude that while the research material cannot solely confirm one of

those two interpretations, it seems that the reasons of entering the entrepreneurial sector depend on the social and professional trajectory of each individual.

Moreover, a common feature that emerged during the fieldwork relates to the adaptability of migrants' business practices to the specific urban context. Either the crisis led a number of migrants to enter the entrepreneurial sector, either it played a negative role to the viability of their enterprises, we can certainly underline that the particular socioeconomic context of the city during this specific timeframe led to the development of adaptable business practices. Nour, established since 2007 at Heyden street, stated that *"we've been in the same shop for eight years. Now we've changed the products. Before, we had mobile phones and other electronic devices. Now we sell cheaper products for refugees. They buy sleeping bags, tents, for about 15 euros. The Greeks mainly buy fans"* (interview extract, 2015, Nour, owner, Bangladesh, Heyden Street, retail shop). Moreover, considering the so-called refugee crisis that had a strong impact in the center of the Athens (and not only) during the years 2015-2016, Ahmet underlined that *"last summer was very good for us, every day you had lots of people coming to get their hair cut. They came by here and then went on to... As long as Germany had open borders, it was very good here for us"* (interview extract, 2017, Ahmet, owner, Pakistan, Acharnon Street, hair salon).

These two narratives offer an alternative perspective of how the so called "refugee crisis" functioned as an opportunity for shopkeepers in central Athens, mainly in the area near Viktorias square. Moreover, they confirm the mixed embeddedness approach, proposed by Kloosterman, van der Leun and Rath (1999), putting forward the fact that migrants' entrepreneurship is closely linked to the socioeconomic context of the host city.

Despite the fact that the crisis is ongoing and no clear answer can be given regarding its influence on migrant entrepreneurship, the research data highlight an array of practices for coping with it. Thus, while there were cases of shops obviously affected by a declining clientele, there were also complex practices for dealing with the crisis, either based on individual initiatives of traders or on collective practices of mutual assistance in starting-up and running a business. Hari, from Pakistan, vividly described the operation of mini-markets by fellow Pakistanis: *"They open a shop as partners, three or four people together. They didn't meet in Pakistan, but here in Greece. Because they work in the same places, they have contacts. One of them usually has papers. He opens more shops. The ones who work in the shop work shifts, someone in the morning, the afternoon, and someone else late. They usually have another job in a factory, a kitchen, washing dishes. Working in the shop isn't enough. But, because the rent is low and because the work they do in the shop doesn't cost much, they*



*make a quick turnover. They give this money to one of the partners, depending on the share he's put in. He opens his own, new shop. Some guys from Pakistan work in the shop, like before. And that way they make something”.*

It is crucial to underline that the adaptability of entrepreneurs to cope with the effects of the economic recession is not an exclusive characteristic of migrant entrepreneurs. The diversification of products, of the working hours or the redefinition of the customer base are among the practices followed also by Greek entrepreneurs. As Skordili and Faka (2018), even the most important supermarket chains introduced new spatial practices to reinforce their presence in Athens's central neighborhoods.

### ***3.4. Precarious working conditions within the field of entrepreneurship***

Another topic that emerged through the interviews relates to the precarious working conditions in the field of entrepreneurship. According to the relevant literature, the figure of the successful migrant entrepreneur masks uneven relations and hierarchies among employees and employers, coethnics or not (Sanders and Nee, 1987; Green, 2006; Werbner, 1999). Moreover, Suzane Hall (2018), in a recently published article, underlines the concept of “migrant margins” to further analyse the attempts of non-native entrepreneurs to make a place in the city.

According to the research data, we observed those uneven relations regarding the exploitive and informal working conditions, the long opening hours, the need to sustain parallel activities in order to gain a full salary for the employees, while for a number of owners the uncertain viability of the business prevails as the main factor of precarious working conditions:

The case of Rafi is characteristic of the above-mentioned precarious conditions. At the time of the interview, he stated that he is working without a fixed schedule, whenever it is needed, in a mini market at Evripidou street, while he is also working at a tavern owned by a Greek, near Omonia (interview extract, 2017, Rafi, employee, Bangladesh, Evripidou street, mini market).

Cesar is an asylum seeker from Iraq, waiting for his application to be investigated at the time of the interview. Since he was owner of a hair salon in Bagdad, he found a job at a Bangladeshi owned hair salon in Acharnon street. The enterprise is operating from ten o'clock in the morning “*until there are no more clients*”, at the end of the day. His pay depends on the number of clients he has, while he keeps only a small percentage of every haircut. The owner

has settled a CCTV camera that register the number of clients that get a haircut (interview extract, 2017, Cesar, employee, Iraq, Acharnon street, hair salon).

Another example is the case of Ali, a refugee from Somalia. He owns a tailor store at Michail Voda street which also serves as his primarily living space. His profits are limited due to the very poor capital investment in professional sewing machines. Moreover, the bad condition of his store further reinforces Ali's vulnerable situation as entrepreneur (interview extract, 2017, Ali, owner, Somalia, Michail Voda street, tailor store).

Lastly, the vulnerability of a number of migrant entrepreneurs is further reinforced by the previous and current restrictive administrative framework that still creates more obstacles than opportunities. While the law 3386/2005 sets as prerequisite a bank deposit of 60 000 euros in order to acquire the permit for independent economic activity, the current legal framework (law 4251/2014) limits the possibility of independent economic activities to migrants having access to the long-term permit.<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the mapping of the data from the commercial chambers shows distinct geographies, according to the nationality of the entrepreneurs, the field study at the street level indicated that migrants' economic activities produces multiple multi-scalar relations and are part of the city's diversity. In addition, the research underlined the importance of these activities as a constituent element of specific central areas of Athens. The field survey in 30 streets showed that shops and services of migrants have an active role in the regeneration of these areas, contrary to the commonly held stereotypes linking migrants' presence to aspects of urban decline.

The analysis of migrants' trajectories shows that the motives for engaging in independent economic activities seem to differ significantly. Entering the business sector is related to the restrictive conditions that prevailed within the labor market of that period, as well as an outcome of personal motives, past experiences and existing social networks that extend from the local to the global. Moreover, in line with Glick-Schiller and Caglar (2013), the field data confirmed the impact of migrant entrepreneurship on the socio-spatial dynamics of specific streets or areas of the city center. Within the current urban context of Athens, migrants' presence becomes even more crucial in terms of social and economic cohesion.

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<sup>5</sup> We should underline that in the National Strategy for the Integration, issued in 2018 by the Ministry of Migration Policy, the reinforcement of migrant's entrepreneurship is clearly stated (p. 99), but without any reference to the overcoming of the administrative barriers.

This study was conducted during a period of economic recession, low domestic consumption, changing migratory patterns and the continuous absence of long term integration policies. While some of these conditions are still valid, new urban processes are currently being shaped. On the one hand, there is a more established presence of asylum seekers and refugees as inhabitants of the city's central areas. On the other, a progressive reinvestment in these areas has led to the gradual growth of real estate market, impacting access to rented residential and commercial properties in diverse ways. The impact of these new urban transformation on the commercial landscape of Athens and specifically on migrants' activities remains open for further investigation.

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