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**WAVES OF IMMIGRATION OF GREEKS
FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

**THE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY OF THE IMMIGRANTS
AND THEIR CULTURAL IMPACT ON THE BROADER GREEK SOCIETY**

This paper attempts to present the collective identity of the immigrants of Greek origin from the former Soviet Union and to study their cultural impact on the broader social whole.

The methodology combines: a) personal interviews with first generation immigrants, conducted in 1986-1992; b) personal or telephone interviews with representatives of Greek-Pontic cultural associations, conducted in 2011, and; c) participant observation of activities of Greek-Pontic associations over the period 1985-2011. The 37 persons interviewed (4 from the first wave of emigration, in the 1920s, who came from the shores of the Black Sea, and 33 from the later influx from Central Asia) were selected by the snowball technique. The biographical approach was used in evaluating the data. Representatives of associations were selected on the basis of "an active association with a long cultural presence". In Greece there are 460 associations of Greeks of Pontic origin (Greeks from Pontus and from regions of the former Soviet Union, primarily from the northeast coast of the Black Sea and Central Asia), of which only 238 can be described as active (cultural and intellectual activity known at least within the local society and with at least one hundred active members); and of these, fewer than 40 have an active history extending over several decades. A total of 25 interviews (7 personal, 18 by telephone) were conducted with representatives of associations from all across the country.

Waves of Emigration and Reasons for Emigrating

There have been successive waves of emigration to Greece from the former Soviet Union since the beginning of the twentieth century; these have involved mainly people of Greek origin, born in the then socialist republics, whose mother tongue is the Pontic dialect.

The first wave, which began in 1918 and continued throughout the 1920s,¹ involved a total of 47,091 persons, all Pontic Greek refugees who described themselves in the 1928 census, as reported in Greece's 1930 statistics yearbook, as natives of the Caucasus region.² The flow of emigration from the former Soviet Union into Greece continued after this initial wave, albeit with long pauses punctuated by new influxes, the most important being those of 1937-1939, 1965-1967 and the 1990s.

The second great wave of emigration of Greeks from the Soviet Union was sparked by the persecution of a substantial sector of the population during the period 1937-1939. Roughly 20,000 Greek women and children emigrated from the Soviet Union to Greece in 1938.³ After 1939 only a limited number of families managed to secure exit permits for emigration to Greece, for leaving the Soviet Union was essentially prohibited.⁴

¹ The emigrants were refugees from northern Anatolia (historic Pontus), who had fled to the Soviet Union to escape persecution at the hands of the Young Turks in 1914-1924, and Greeks living in the Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. They came to Greece because of the poor prospects for the Greek communities in the wake of historic events such as the October Revolution (1917), the advance of Turkish troops into the Caucasus in 1918, the violence practised by the Armenian authorities in drafting them into the armed forces, the unsuccessful Entente campaign in the Ukraine against Bolshevik troops in 1919, and the nationalist policies of the Mensheviks in Georgia. See Βεργέτη Μαρία Κ., Παλινοδότηση και Κοινωνικός Αποκλεισμός 3rd edition, Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers 2010, 72-73 [Vergeti M., Repatriation and Social Exclusion].

² At least 230,000 Pontic refugees from northern Anatolia and the former Soviet Union came to Greece between 1918-1930. The 1928 census recorded 229,260 Pontic refugees, of whom 182,169 declared Pontus as their place of origin, while 47,091 said they came from the Caucasus. This number certainly falls short of the reality, not least because of the heavy mortality suffered by the refugees during the first post-emigration years.

³ Ζαπάντης Ανδρέας Η., Ελληνο-οσβετικές σχέσεις 1917-1941, Μετ. Άγγελος Σ. Βλάχος, Athens: Estia 1989, 341 [Andreas I. Zapantis., Helleno-Russian Relations 1917-1941, tr. Angelos S. Vlachos].

⁴ Few families came between 1946 and 1948. The families that acquired emigration permits in 1946 were residents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and those who were allowed to leave in 1948 were residents of the Uzbek city of Kokkan. In 1957 another one hundred families emigrated from Central Asia. See Vergeti M., Repatriation and Social Exclusion, 76-78.

A new wave of emigration, mainly from Central Asia, began in 1965; this was interrupted in 1967 by the coup d'état which imposed a dictatorship on Greece from 1967 to 1974, but resumed after normalcy was restored.⁵ According to information supplied by Greek-Pontic associations, another 30,000 Pontic Greeks, mainly from Central Asia, settled in Greece between 1965 and 1988.⁶

With the re-organisation of the Soviet Union that began in 1985 the borders were gradually opened and the barriers to emigration lifted. The groundswell of emigration that began in 1987 brought increasing numbers of people of Greek origin (mainly Pontic) to Greece. For most of these immigrants, what drove them to leave was the desire to live in their "native" land, coupled with a minority syndrome⁷: with the other Greeks leaving, they lost the sense of security provided by a community and felt the need to move to the place where their own people had to decided to settle.

The period 1985-1991 was characterised by economic recession, nationalist unrest and local conflicts. This was followed by the collapse of existing socialism in 1991 and a further worsening of the economic crisis and nationalist troubles. The impact on the Greek communities was immediate and highly unfavourable. The wave of emigration to Greece swelled again over the period 1991-1993,⁸ substantially fuelled by a number of new considerations, including fear of nationalist upheaval and civil war, economic reasons, and the desire for "a better life for the children".⁹ Of the total number of families recorded as having emigrated to Greece between 1987 and 2000 (48,980), for 42% the reason for emigrating was the desire to live in Greece, for 22% unemployment, for

⁵ In 1971 a limited number of families emigrated from the city of Kentau in Kazakhstan. See Vergeti Maria., *Repatriation and Social Exclusion*, 78.

⁶ This number was first cited in 1988 by Theodoros Kiahopoulos in a paper presented to the Second World Congress of Pontic Hellenism on *The Problems of New Arrivals from the Soviet Union and their Fellow-Countrymen Rhere*.

⁷ Βεργέτη Μ., (ed.), *Ομογενείς από την πρώην Σοβιετική Ένωση 1985-1995*, Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers, 1998, 79-83; 140-141 [Vergeti Maria, *Ethnic Greeks from the former Soviet Union 1985-1995*].

⁸ Γενική Γραμματεία Παλιννοστούντων Ομογενών, Υπουργείο Μακεδονίας-Θράκης (2000), *Η ταυτότητα των παλιννοστούντων ομογενών από την πρώην Ε.Σ.Σ.Δ.: Απογραφικά στοιχεία Ελλάδας, Μακεδονίας, Θράκης, Αττικής*, Thessaloniki, 46 [General Secretariat for Repatriated Greeks, Ministry of Macedonia-Thrace, *Identity of the repatriated Greeks from the former USSR: Census data for Greece, Macedonia, Thrace, Attica*].

⁹ Vergeti M., *Ethnic Greeks from the former Soviet Union 1985-1995*, 79-83, 140-141.

19% civil war, for 8% the fact that family members were leaving, for 6% terrorism, while the remaining 3% cited various other reasons.¹⁰

Over the period 1997-2000 the General Secretariat for Repatriated Greeks (a department of the Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace) made an effort to compile a list of all the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who had arrived and remained in Greece between 1987 and 2000, entering either with a tourist visa or with a visa for immigration. By the end of this period (December 2000), the total had reached 155,319 persons, while according to the records there were 1593 who did not declare their year of arrival. Between 1977-1986 the number of immigrants to Greece was 334; of the rest, 169 people arrived in 1987, 669 in 1988, 5195 in 1989, 16,716 in 1990, 17,331 in 1991, 19,846 in 1992, 25,720 in 1993, 14,737 in 1994, 14,586 in 1995, 14,298 in 1996, 12,381 in 1997, 5761 in 1998, 4676 in 1999 and 1307 in 2000.¹¹

This total figure of 155,319 is certainly short of the mark, largely because the census was not compulsory. According to the General Secretariat for Repatriated Greeks, 97,000 Greeks from abroad, or 63% of the total, had followed the proper legal procedures; the remaining 37%, or 58,000 people, had entered Greece on tourist visas.¹² The largest number of arrivals in any single year was 26,000 (1993).¹³

Since the turn of the new century the flow of emigration has dwindled to a trickle, and there is thought to be no reason to expect any new surge in the rate of arrivals of Greeks from the former Soviet Union.

Interaction Processes

The focus of this paper is on the contribution of the immigrant population from the former Soviet Union to the broader social whole and not on problems of integration, although it must be said that numerous problems arose on the institutional and economic level, as well as in terms of social intercourse. The social marginalisation these immigrants experienced in Greece was possibly more painful than the economic. Emigrating to a country of fellow-nationals is not the same as emigrating to a foreign land. When that state and those people, their own country and their own fellow-countrymen, failed to give them the expected sense of security, the problems of integration were perhaps even greater than for other groups

¹⁰ General Secretariat for Repatriated Greeks, *Identity of the repatriated Greeks from the former USSR*, 52.

¹¹ General Secretariat ..., 46.

¹² General Secretariat ..., 28.

¹³ General Secretariat ..., 28.

of immigrants. This social exclusion operated most powerfully against the immigrants of 1965-1967.

From the end of the 1980s and throughout the following decade the Greek state, with the assistance of numerous public and private organisations, did try to facilitate the economic, educational and cultural integration of Greeks from the former Soviet Union. But despite the multitude of organisations involved, there was no co-ordinated intervention that could have limited their deprivation of what constitutes the national way of life.

From interviews with representatives of cultural associations it is clear that the Greeks from the former Soviet Union have played an important role in preserving and passing on to younger generations such basic elements of culture as dance, music and theatre. Interviewees regularly made statements like: "We Pontian Greeks ran the association, but the dance teacher and the lyricist were from the wave of 1939". Suffice it to mention, in this connection, just two names: theatre director Polis Haitas, born in Pontus in 1902, who studied music and theatre in Russia and whose role in creating and preserving Pontic theatre in Greece is inestimable; and, in the field of letters, academician Theoharis Kessidis, born in Georgia in 1920, who was a regular member of both the Moscow Academy of Research in the Humanities and the St Petersburg Academy of Arts and, after 1987, a corresponding member of the Academy of Athens. Another area where the impact of these immigrants has been important is in the preservation of the Pontic dialect, especially in places where there are large communities of Pontic Greeks.

Collective Identity

Settling in Greece enabled the incomers to mix and interact with metropolitan Greeks whose roots lay in northeast Anatolia (Pontus). They became members of the broader group of Pontic Greeks, which is a diaspora population. Pontic Hellenism is characterised by its connection with a place that is no longer socially present. The social bonds with historic Pontus were shattered by violence, the local communities dispersed, and mass return made impossible by international treaty. The historic memory of Pontic Hellenism is the memory of a place, the historic and cultural particularity of a population, and the memory of a shared destiny of diaspora.

It is important to remember that the immigrants from the former Soviet Union are a mixed population. Collective identity is shaped by a group's relation with its social environment, and the social environment of the Black Sea coast was very different to that of Central Asia. It is a feature

of this group that a significant proportion, most notably among the immigrants of the period 1965-1987, knew nothing of their historic connection with Pontus before arriving in Greece.

Cited below are passages from two interviews, which show how different the Greek various populations from the former Soviet Union were, depending on their region of origin and the decade in which they arrived in Greece: "My grandfather, Georgios Makridis of Trebizond, had a little fleet of seven sailing vessels, with which he traded between Pontus and the Caucasus, via Novorossiysk. In 1877 many of the Greeks in Pontus left for Russia, because of the Russo-Turkish War. My grandfather was a Russian citizen, and all Russian citizens living in Turkey were expelled. In 1878 he settled permanently in Krymskaya and continued to trade, as did my father, Christophoros Makridis. My family lived in Krymskaya until 1921. As bourgeois, we suffered a great deal in the years 1917-1921. In the mountains there were guerrillas who raided the towns, killing Bolsheviks and seizing arms and other goods before disappearing again. Then the Bolsheviks started arresting people, priests, professional people and merchants. They held them as hostages, and some were killed. My father was imprisoned three times, as a hostage, in the basement of the Greek school in Krymskaya. Had we not fled in secret in 1921, he might have shared the fate of his friends, who were all executed later."¹⁴

"The first years were very difficult. In Kazakhstan they said that we were Greeks and had to go back to our own country. We came here, and they said we were "Pontii" (Pontic Greeks). I didn't know anything about Pontus when I came here, except that the Greek families came from there. Only, a classmate of mine, who had come to Greece as a tourist, told me when she got back to Kazakhstan that there is a difference between us and the Greeks from Greece: they speak differently, and they call us "Pontii" and themselves "Dopii" (natives, locals). Here things were pretty bad for me. I went to night school, and worked all day in a printer's shop to help my family. My parents didn't ask me to work, but my brother and I saw it as the only way we could help them. I was really upset, because I didn't understand why things should be like that, why we were in the Soviet Union when "Greece is our country", why they called us "Pontii". Our relatives and other Pontic Greeks from the Soviet Union, who had come years before, told me that things had been worse for them, we had no one, they said, and you've got us, but that was no consolation to me. It was not

¹⁴ Mrs. Athena Makridi-Kalliga and her father and grandfather are identified by name with her permission.

until I met some kids and they told me about our history from Pontus and that we should be proud of who we were, that I began to feel better. Back in Kazakhstan there was no Greek school to tell us about our history, nor was there any Greek association, and my family didn't know how they had come to be in Georgia."¹⁵

The collective identity of the Greeks from the former Soviet Union in Greece is shaped by two determinant factors, namely the creation of a deeper historical awareness, which connects them to the other Pontic Greeks, and the changes consequent upon emigration. At the same time, the waves of emigration from the former Soviet Union have kept alive the memory of historic Pontus, and reinforced Pontic Hellenism in Greece with new bearers of their particular culture, as this has evolved from compact groups in different geographical reference spaces.

¹⁵ From an interview with an immigrant woman who came to Greece in the 1970s.