

Conclusions

MIGRATION LEADERS POLICY SEMINAR SERIES

13–14 May 2013
Athens, Greece



The Migration Policy Institute—together with the new School of Public Policy at Central European University—launched its inaugural *Migration Leaders Policy Seminar* in Athens, Greece, on May 13–14, 2013, the first in a series generously funded by the Open Society Foundations. This high-level event brought together European Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, five Greek ministers and deputy ministers, the deputy director of UNHCR, and several experts over two days.*

* European Union Commissioner for Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmström delivered the keynote, and Deputy UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Alex Aleinikoff provided one of the retreat's key lectures. They engaged in a lively debate with Greek Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection, Nikos Dendias; Greek Deputy Interior Minister, Charalambos Athanassiou; Greek Parliamentarian, Mavroudis Voridis; Secretary General of the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection, Patroklos Georgiadis; and Secretary General of Population and Social Cohesion for the Ministry of Interior, Angelos Syrigos.

The decision to hold the first seminar in Greece was motivated by the unique migration challenges facing the country—namely the overburdened asylum system, the precarious situation of irregular migrants residing in Greece, and the toxic public debate surrounding how to address these issues.

Following the asylum crisis in 2010/2011, Greece has considerably improved its asylum procedures. Authorities have reformed the processing of asylum claims (shifting responsibility away from the police to independent civilian committees), caught up on a backlog of around 55,000 unprocessed asylum claims, established new reception centers, and strengthened border controls to combat human smuggling and trafficking. These improvements were praised by different participants, with Greece now meeting or exceeding European standards regarding its asylum policies and procedures. However there is a limit to what one country can accomplish on its own, and Greece has called for more meaningful solidarity and burden-sharing from other EU Member States.

Greece receives more than 80 percent of the illegal entrants to the European Union, which have quickly—and for years now—overwhelmed the country's infrastructure. As a result, thousands of migrants have been held in deplorable conditions, and thousands more make their way illegally to Europe. Public and political reaction in Greece has been acute, with membership of the fascist, anti-immigrant Golden Dawn party reaching double digits. More fences and more sea patrols are not enough to address this burgeoning crisis; Greece needs to work across its entire government, reach out to international partners (especially Turkey), and work much more productively with the European Union. Border control is only one instrument among the many needed to regain control of the situation, coordinated efforts across countries and ministries are also critical pieces of the puzzle.

Greece is seen by many as the “gateway” to Europe proofs it should be accepted that neither the problem nor the solution lies with Greece alone. Many of those who enter Greece illegally do so with the aim of seeking opportunities in other EU Member States. Unable to be returned to their country of origin and unable to travel farther into Europe, they become “trapped” in Greece, overwhelming the inadequate detention facilities and asylum adjudication processes. All the while, Greece must provide access to basic healthcare and public services for a population unable to support itself. It is against this backdrop that Greece has appealed for real solidarity from the rest of Europe. Greece has also requested support in entering into effective agreements with Turkey to improve border controls, help curb smuggling and trafficking, and establish a working readmission agreement.

This selective, off-the-record high-level retreat was developed exclusively for Greek policymakers to think through this multifaceted challenge and brainstorm equally complex solutions. The “whole of government” approach needed to alleviate some of the more urgent migration challenges facing Greece requires more coordination than is typical in other policy domains:

- **On a technical level**, these challenges include: reducing illegal migration to manageable levels and implementing smarter enforcement measures; managing existing unauthorized populations responsibly; treating migrants humanely and with dignity; addressing the underlying drivers that make illegal migration attractive; and continuing to facilitate the movement of legitimate travelers and trade that the economy requires.
- **On the political level**, the challenge is to perform all these functions well enough to convince anxious and skeptical citizens that the government is in control of migration, while also demonstrating to the international community that progress is being made in the areas which affect Europe the most. These tasks are particularly challenging in an environment low in resources and high in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Several observations emerged from the candid deliberations:

1. Despite solidarity “on paper,” Greece feels alone in addressing its immigration challenges.

- Ministers stressed that migrants don’t come to Greece, they come to Europe. Most of Greece’s illegal migrants do not expect to live or work in Greece—entering the country is simply a stepping stone to further EU destinations—and yet Greece is left to shoulder the entire burden.
- These people quickly become “trapped”—they cannot be sent home, they cannot go farther into Europe, they cannot be held indefinitely in detention, and there are no EU funds to deal with the integration crisis Greece has on its hands.
- The European Commission believes there is absolutely no political will among other EU Member States to relocate asylum seekers that come to Greece—and this won’t change, so Greece must learn to exploit the tools and resources it does have.
- The Commission says there is financial and technical assistance available that is untapped because Greece has not developed a detailed enough action plan, and the country has been unable to absorb all the of money that is available.

2. Greece must lay the foundation for a whole-of-government migration policy now—waiting until the political and economic conditions are favorable will be too late.

- Greece will never be able to alter its geography: it is the main gateway of illegal migration to Europe, with a notoriously difficult set of borders to manage. But it can change its approach to managing both migration and relations with neighboring countries.
- You can’t develop a system only when the circumstances are convenient: Greece needs to start today in order to get to the point where it can choose the immigrants it needs (and is not at the mercy of immigrants who choose Greece)—when the timing is right.
- Migration policy is an interdependent system: all of its component parts are related (labor, health, access to public services, public order, foreign affairs, justice, citizenship), and feed each other in either a virtuous or vicious cycle.

3. Engaging Turkey is key

- Turkey’s new immigration law creates an opportunity for the country to become a serious interlocutor on migration management—not just on criminality and borders.
- However the single greatest challenge is how to negotiate a readmissions agreement—which would be much more successful as an EU-backed effort, rather than a push from Greece alone.

4. Greece has made huge progress, but it needs to do more to publicize its successes and build public confidence

- By this summer, Greece will be in line with (or exceeding) EU standards on asylum: They have set up a new, civilian-run asylum service no longer linked to the criminal system (to be operational in June 2013), are opening new reception centers, and are processing a backlog of more than 55,000 cases (which they expect to cover in the next 18-24 months).
- The single most important thing is for the public to trust the way the migration system is being run. To ease public anxiety, governments need to show that the system is orderly, border controls are strong, and the country is creating opportunities for people without disadvantaging its own citizens.

5. Political rhetoric cannot replace good policy; but it does matter

- Greek officials need to redirect public anger away from immigrants (and other scapegoats) and toward the real causes of economic pain.
- At the same time, they need to frame people's concerns as reasonable; it can be an enormous door opener to let publics know they're not racist to have these concerns.
- There is a need to find ways to tap into positive side of nationalism and build a national narrative that supports progressive policies on immigration; in Greece this could mean tapping into the culture of "hospitality."

6. In the absence of real solidarity, Greece may choose to "play hardball" with the EU

- Greece could give "trapped people" legal status, both as a means of integrating them into the labor market and also allowing transit migrants to access the rest of Schengen; this could force a huge confrontation with the EU.

Appendix I

Full Set of Meeting Notes

I. Building a “Whole-of-System” Approach to Migration

► Need to work across government

- There has been no organized, systematic conversation across sections of the Greek government (between the departments of interior, public order, and labor) where migration is addressed in a holistic manner.
- Migration policy is an interdependent system: all of its component parts are related (labor, health, access to public services, public order, foreign affairs, justice, citizenship), and feed each other in either a virtuous or vicious cycle. A well-functioning asylum system can help a well-functioning migration system, and vice versa.
- Lack of coordination and different hierarchies and priorities that different ministries operate under never go away.

“As a minister you’re never an independent contractor—you’re constrained by (and at the mercy of) other portfolios.”

► Need to lay the groundwork today for the challenges of tomorrow

- You can’t develop a system only when the politics/circumstances are convenient—you have to develop a system today for the day when the social conditions/demographics/politics come together and you will need to select immigrants. It’s not about a single solution. Just focusing on borders won’t work. We need to figure out how to manage the system—which has many moving parts that all need to be addressed.
- So far, the status quo allows immigrants to choose their destination: immigrants go wherever they want to go; the objective of policy is for governments to choose the immigrants they need.

“Migration is not a valve you can turn on or off.”

► The conversation cannot only be about borders

- While Greece is the main gateway of illegal migration to Europe, with a notoriously difficult set of borders to manage, it will never be able to alter its geography. But it can change its approach to managing both migration and relations with neighboring countries.
- Failing to resolve the underlying drivers of illegality will simply displace, not eradicate, the problem: When you close down your land borders, pressure shifts to maritime borders.
- You cannot prevent all illegal migration in a society—if that’s your goal (of if that is what you promise the public), you’re going to fail.



Wolfgang Reinicke, SPP Dean, Demetrios Papademetriou, President, Migration Policy Institute, Cecilia Malström, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, and Alexander Aleinikov, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees (from front)

- Tackling the whole problem involves deterrence, securing the borders, creating a modern asylum system, and ensuring swift repatriation for those who cannot remain.
- The need to target employers who hire unauthorized workers is not so clear cut in Greece—many migrants have entered to transit rather than to work, yet find themselves trapped. There is a real question of how people would survive without working in the shadow economy (if they can't be hired by anyone, they will turn to the state, which can't afford them—which could in turn push them toward criminal activity).

*“However many fences we might build,
we know the pressures on our borders will continue to exist.”*

II. Working with External Partners

► Greece cannot solve its problems on its own; but willing partners are hard to find

- The European Commission recognized that trapped migrants put a lot of pressure on the Greek system—but there are no apparent solutions. There is absolutely no political will among other EU Member States to accept a quota or accept to relocate migrants from Greece. Any relocation program would have to be voluntary.
- EU Member States have extremely different interests. Even in Greece, their interests in solving the crisis are motivated by wildly different goals (some stand on principle, others are just waiting until things improve so they can send asylum seekers back).
- Getting migration right—in all of its components (borders, humanitarian protection, integration)—is extremely important not just for Greece, but for the European Union as a whole. Greece cannot do it alone.

“It’s easy to place blame; it’s much harder to share the burden.”

“Greeks are entitled to ask for support—but the achievement of establishing a clear set of rules on migration and asylum and enforcing those rules can only be done by the Greek government.”

► The crisis goes far beyond the asylum system

- Asylum seekers are part of the immigration crisis to Greece, but not the whole—or biggest—problem. The main stress on Greek society is from illegal immigrants, many of whom declare asylum only once arrested (which can be many months or even years after arrival)—suggesting these are not genuine claims.
- This is part of the reason the proportion of positive responses is lower than in other places—some of these petitions are obviously fraudulent.
- Most of Greece's illegal migrants do not expect to live or work in Greece—entering the country is simply a stepping stone to further EU destinations.

“The problem is that most of these people don’t come to Greece, they come to Europe.”

► Greece is stuck with more people than it can manage to support.

- Most immigrants don't want to stay in Greece, but they can't go further into the EU, and they can't be sent back (no readmission agreements). Thus they remain in Greece not because there are jobs, but because they can't leave.
- Greece bears an immense burden from migration, especially from illegal migrants—who are fully covered medically, have the same access to education, legal aid, and all social services, without contributing to the economy. Yet these people do not fall under EU financing tools (you can't use the border fund, the reintegration fund, etc to mitigate these costs).
- The Greek government would like to see EU solidarity in more practical ways, and not only when it comes to asylum seekers (for which EU support has been widely recognized and appreciated).

“We cannot compromise with human rights; The EU has to be an example to the rest of the world, even when times are bad.”

► Addressing the Problem of Trapped Migrants is a European Problem

- Some Greek officials want to talk about reforming the Dublin II Convention to take into account Greece's position as a transit country. Others say Dublin is not the main priority; the bigger problem is Schengen—which forces Greece to trap immigrants within its territory. They don't see any political will to manage the burden of caring for trapped migrants.
- There are at least 500,000 people who can't get jobs, can't be returned, can't be kept in detention centers for longer than 18 months, and can't continue to other parts of Europe. They are trapped and can't be integrated.

“No one is proposing that immigration is the solution to the many problems Greece is facing—but it could be part of the solution.”

► There are contradictory views on what “solidarity” means in the EU-Greece context

- The European Commission notes that Greece's current asylum system does not mean current standards for protecting human rights (subpar detention conditions, lengthy processing times, and low recognition rates); at the same time they're aware of the financial constraints and also the progress that has been made so far.

- The European Commission feels that the international community has shown a lot of solidarity, but for that solidarity to persist, it needs to see constant improvement and detailed action plan.
- The Commission says there is financial and technical assistance available that is untapped because Greece cannot absorb the money.
- Greek officials say they do have a detailed plan; they have simply come to the point where they need more money. They've taken advantage of everything allocated for border security, but there is a huge gap between what resources are needed, what Greece has asked for, and what the EU has given them.
- The European Commission may not understand all the politics in Greece: They have suggested that Greece use structural funds earmarked for other projects (such as building roads, infrastructure) and apply them to migration—this would be extremely politically sensitive.
- Of course, the EU can do more—for instance providing technical assistance and expertise, helping identify solutions, coordinating support efforts (like with EASO), putting pressure on other EU Member States to engage, and working with third countries on readmission to see if cooperation can be increased.
- But ultimate responsibility lies with Greece—they need to solve problems that come from internal obstacles, and they need to absorb available funds.

“It’s time for Greece to take full ownership of its action plan.”

*“We hear genuine calls for solidarity around the table
—but when it comes to actually managing these numbers of migrants,
we do feel very alone.”*

► Cooperation with Turkey is critical

- Turkish migration reform is an opportunity for Greece—bilateral relations between the two can evolve beyond simple police matters once there is real cooperation across the border.
- Greece might profit from Schengen enlargement (Bulgaria and Romania could attract some illegal migration).
- The biggest challenge is negotiating readmission agreements with migrants’ country of origin—particularly Turkey. Greece needs help exerting pressure on Turkey to make this happen. It would have more leverage if the agreement were backed by the EU.
- There are no circumstances under which the US will invest political capital to tell Turkey to work on its relationship with Greece.
- The EU is becoming less and less relevant to Turkey. By the time the EU is prepared to offer Turkey membership to the EU, Turkey won’t be interested. They have set themselves on a course that is not a European course. Turkey wishes to be the lead regional player.



Nikolaos Dendias, Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection (left), Patroklos Georgiadis, Secretary General, Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection (middle) and Mavroudis Voridis, Member of Parliament (right)

III. Building Public Confidence in Government

► No openings for discussion of future labor migration

- Europe is simultaneously facing growing unemployment and a shortage of skills. Yet with GDP continuing to decline in Greece, and youth unemployment exceeding 50 percent, it is more difficult than ever to have a rational conversation about migration. And how does a government weave a narrative that can contend with these challenges?
- The discussion explored how to contend with the “one-two punch?” Everyone is getting older while the new-worker pipeline is getting thinner—who is going to do the jobs our society will depend on in the future?
- In Greece, 700,000 irregular migrants have been arrested and fingerprinted since 2007, providing a snapshot of the scale of illegal migration in the country.

“Theoretically, we may need more immigrants. But not in Greece, not now.”

► The public needs to believe that migration rules are orderly, fair, and enforced

- The single most important thing is for the public to trust the way the migration system is being run. To ease public anxiety, governments need to show that the system is orderly, that the country chooses newcomers (not the other way around), border controls are strong, and country is creating opportunities for people without disadvantaging its own people.
- Without public trust, almost anything the government does will be rejected; even if you regain control, you won’t have enough license to work within the system (people will be working against you and making it more difficult for you to accomplish what needs to be done).

► Greece needs to publicize its successes

- The Greek government needs to “advertise” its successes and get the word out that the situation is improving. Greece has a bad reputation on asylum, and it is important to spread the news that this isn’t (all) true anymore. Great policy and implementation does not sell itself.
- The Greek government needs to work with civil society to raise awareness and educate people on how Greece’s geopolitical/economic circumstances create a difficult operating environment.

► Good management does not mean achieving perfection

- If the goal is perfection you will fail; a better target is to develop limited goals and show constant improvement. The idea is to show that the systems are under control, and that they’re getting better.
- A fair asylum adjudication system doesn’t mean that every application is granted; it means every applicant is guaranteed a fair review.
- It is crucial to build public acceptance of the asylum process—if this system is mismanaged and has long backlogs, it spills over into a lack of public approval for migration in general.

*“It’s hard to develop good migration policies in good times,
and it’s really hard in bad times.”*

► Building public trust in government is key

- The overall trust in (and reputation of) government is far more important than reports of incremental improvements—the public’s impressions are formed by the worst exceptions, lurid stories, and the rantings of people on the far right (who are either fabricating or exaggerating).
- The viciousness of the far right’s reactions in Greece are not just a reflection of the numbers of migrants, but of the economic crisis. An effective strategy to take the venom out of this issue has to go far beyond the migration issue itself.

► Need to deal cautiously to combat Golden Dawn

- What distinguishes these parties is the ability to capture the moment, which in Greece today means emphasizing control and personal security.
- Government needs to allow Golden Dawn voters to change their opinions of their own accord; overly aggressive tactics could drive those voters to a type of marginalization that will never allow them to come back into the mainstream.
- Not everyone voting for such parties necessarily subscribes to anti-immigrant views: sometimes they’re doing it to punish the establishment or to solve economic problems; radical-right votes don’t necessarily correlate to radical people.

► Government needs to meet people where they are

- Immigration is an issue characterized by mixed feelings; but it’s important to validate people’s ambivalence—especially as this is rooted in some very real concerns.
- Political communication should always start by acknowledging peoples’ concerns, and only then move to making demands.

- The government needs to frame people's concerns as reasonable and it's not dishonorable to talk about them; let them know they're not racist to have these concerns. This is an enormous door-opener.
- Doing the opposite just fuels the flames.

► **Anti-immigrant voices are often the loudest; there is less passion in favor of immigration**

- There's an asymmetry in public opinion on migration everywhere in the world, which is why polling on this issue is often misleading. There is an intensity gap in favor of the opponents.
- There is a need to find a way to tap into positive emotions and the positive side of nationalism, finding strands of national narrative in each country that support progressive policies on immigration. Even countries that are not traditional nations of immigration can find parts of their national myths that support open immigration.
- Greece can use its culture of "hospitality" or history as a country of emigration (ie, the memory of what it means to be mistreated as an emigrant) to build a positive narrative that includes immigrants. The Mayor of Athens appealed to a certain core sense of identity—Greek hospitality—saying that Golden Dawn really overstepped its bounds and we can't treat people like that, it's not Greek. Being able to say "this is who we are as a people" is the only way to redress the imbalance of passion.
- Look at the power of certain narratives to establish that sense of earning (eg, serving in the US military gives you a path to citizenship). "How do people earn the right to be somewhere?"
- Narratives are built up over time; it comes down to political creativity to unearth something that hasn't yet been part of national conversation and elevate it to that position.
- Isolated, nasty anecdotes capture public imagination (immigrants sponging off of society, etc).
- The truth is never just on one side or the other, so it's not about effacing the anti-immigrant side, it's about adding more of the positive anecdotes—to create more of a balance, even if you don't always win.

► **Need to systematically debunk myths of immigration opponents**

- We need not only statistics, but events that highlight these points concretely and show immigrants as productive members of society, law-abiding, patriots, etc.
- In the US it has been crucial to find people from the opposition camp who can become supporters/allies; Greeks need to find people on the right who are looking for ways to disassociate themselves from the ugly violence/rhetoric.

► **Economic crisis does not automatically doom immigration reform**

- In the US, the economy is at the worst it has been in 80 years.
- One theory is that the "Occupy" movements in the US helped channel American public anger toward income/wealth inequality and toward Wall Street. It put into public minds the idea of 1% vs 99% and created a steam vent for public anger.

► **Need to redirect public anger away from immigrants**

- In the absence of ways to vent public anger, it tends to attach to immigrants (or other scapegoats)—especially in bad economic times.

- One opinion is that Greece needs to do everything possible to draw attention away from immigrants and redirect public anger toward the causes of economic decline, such as Swiss bank accounts, corruption, the EU, etc.
- Another opinion is that in Greece, diverting public anger to the EU may not reduce public anger about immigration—it still places the blame on “foreigners,” which reinforces the “us versus them” mentality. Both are seen as infringing on Greek sovereignty.
- In the US, income inequality doesn’t distinguish between natives and immigrants; Greece also needs something to band together immigrants with natives, in solidarity.

► Political rhetoric cannot replace good policy; but it does matter

- Advocates should run focus groups/polling to get people’s reactions to 30 different ways you might describe phrases like “reception center,” “detention center.”
- It may be better to avoid talking about immigration: the more you talk about it, the worse you do with domestic audiences.
- No need to have the public focused on it when there is no new legislation/push for reform (as there is in the US, where Obama has a very specific goal in mind when he talks about it).
- The counterargument is that in Greece, all political parties have opted to use immigration as part of their ideology—it is a dividing line between parties.



SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
Central European University

Nádor utca 9, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary
 Phone/Fax: (+36 1) 327-3110

<http://spp.ceu.hu>