

# Ukrainian Migration to Greece: Patterns and Challenges of Remaining and of Return

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*The aim of the paper is to describe the main patterns and challenges of Ukrainian migration to Greece with reference to the consequences of the recent economic and social crisis in the host country on the migrants' lives. Specifically, the paper discusses the impact of the legal framework related to migration in four different periods. Historically, Greece was one of the first destinations attracting Ukrainian migrants, but the migration flows have strongly decreased during the last years and a tendency for return migration has emerged. Among the key features is the fact that the migrant's experience is deeply influenced and shaped by Greece's policy response to migration. The paper will therefore specifically examine the impact of the legislative measures on the mobility of the migrants.*

*Keywords: Ukrainian migration; Greece; economic crisis; return migration; family reunification*

## Introduction

Ukrainians are among the oldest and most populous migrant groups in Greece during the last two decades. They are an important group to be studied as nationals of a country that belonged to the ex-communist societies with a state-controlled economy; consequently, some of the characteristics of their patterns of migration are perceived as representative for the migrants from Eastern European countries. Furthermore, the largest part of the Ukrainian migrant population – approximately 80 per cent, is women, making it essential to include the gender perspective.

At the same time, the Ukrainian community in Greece has been decreasing in size over the last five years. Already a tendency before the eruption of the economic crisis, this trend became an even more striking phenomenon during the crisis. In order to explore the dynamics and the key issues regarding the Ukrainian migration to Greece since its beginning in the 1990s, this paper will focus on the patterns and challenges related to each different period during the last twenty years. The periodisation of the migration is defined by the author; each period starts with a key event such as new legislation or a new wave of migrants due to other reasons related to e.g. changes in the socio-economic environment in their home country.

Hofmann and Reichel (2011) suggest the following typology of the broader patterns of Ukrainian migration during the last twenty years: migration of ethnic minorities; legal and irregular labour migration to Western European countries; and short-term circular migration, whether regular or undocumented, to Western Europe as well as to neighbouring countries. Regarding the socio-economic profile of the Ukrainians

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fleeing abroad, the majority were workers from urban areas who had lost their jobs; however, from 1997 the migration is mostly from villages and from small towns. The abolition of exit visa requirements in January 1993 was a step towards the liberalisation of intra-national mobility for Ukrainians. Thus, during 1994–1998 emigration increased with Greece as one of the first European countries preferred by the Ukrainians as a destination for longer-term economic migration. The majority of the Ukrainians presently in Greece are long-term migrants who came during the 1990s.

The first publications in the 1990s and early 2000 by Greek researchers referred to migrants from the ex-USSR countries in general, including Ukrainians, although the research mostly focused on the Greek repatriates. After the population census of 2001 and the analyses of the data of immigrants who had submitted applications during the first regularisation programme in 1998, by nationality, it became obvious that migration from Ukraine had a strong female character. Apart from ethnic Ukrainians, among the migrants were ethnic Greeks and Mariupol Greeks that started repatriating during the same period (Kaurinkoski 2008). Migration to Greece began from the western areas of Ukraine, with people from the central areas starting to follow later on and from the eastern and southern parts of the country by the mid-1990s, although Mariupol Greeks migrated from Eastern Ukraine and Pontic Greeks mainly from Crimea and the southern part of Ukraine (Kaurinkoski 2008). At that time Greece was seen as a cheap destination where one could easily find work in the informal labour market, which explains the magnitude of the flows.

The decade of the 1990s for Greece as a new migration destination is mainly characterised by the arrival of migrants from the former socialist countries – either neighbouring countries or countries with a Greek diaspora. Mostly these were Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Georgians and Romanians. However, about 60 per cent of the migrants came from a single country: Albania. Over 70 per cent of the Ukrainians were female (a proportion that has not changed much over the years) while almost all of the Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian migrants were male. Most of the migrants from the former socialist countries came on a visa which they overstayed, continuing to work and live in Greece for years without proper documents. The migration to Greece in the decade of 2000 displays patterns typical for the Mediterranean countries: 1) South–North movements from North Africa to Southern European countries, 2) South-East–North movements, meaning migration from Asian countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, 3) North-East–West movements, which refers to the former socialist countries (Baldwin-Edwards 2007).

To explore the key issues regarding Ukrainian migration to Greece since its beginning in the 1990s, the paper focuses on the different patterns and challenges associated with migration. The article also identifies key moments or events to differentiate different periods of migration and the socio-demographic characteristics of Ukrainian migrants.

## **Methodology**

The article is based on primary and secondary research data. The primary research data includes analysis of a number of key informant interviews with relevant actors (community organisations, NGOs and governmental agencies) and interviews with immigrants conducted during two research projects in 2013<sup>1</sup> and in 2008–2009<sup>2</sup>. The interviews were conducted before the crisis in Ukraine, triggered by the government's last-minute rejection of the association agreement with the European Union and which subsequently developed into an armed conflict.

The scope of the interviews with community leaders in the two stages of the field work was to understand the current migration dynamics, the role of the community and the challenges faced by community members at different stages of migration. The questionnaires addressed the migrants' choice for Greece as a destination country, the working and living conditions throughout the years spent in the host country, and their plans

for the future. Following these thematic cycles of the questionnaire, questions were asked about the role of the family, the networks and the authorities. Specifically, in 2008 six interviews were conducted with community leaders or other individuals active in the Ukrainian communities (four women and two men). In 2013, five qualitative interviews were conducted using open questionnaires with active members of the Ukrainian communities (three of whom were questioned previously in 2008) and four interviews with migrants (females, holders of residence permits living in Athens).

The secondary research data derives from relevant literature on Ukrainian migration to Greece and statistical data. The statistical data depict the demographic characteristics of Ukrainians in Greece and their labour market situation, and were provided by relevant authorities: the Hellenic Statistical Service (ELSTAT) and the Social Insurance Institute (IKA). The literature review focuses on the characteristics of migrants' flows to Greece, the changes in the flows' composition and reasons behind those changes, the migration policies implemented in Greece, and the impact of these policies on the migratory routes and trajectories.

### **Overview of the different phases/periods of Ukrainian migration to Greece**

First, to delineate the boundaries of different periods and to analyse the patterns of migration and the results of the policies, some concepts of the migration systems approach will be introduced and the factors that influence the dynamics of the various migration patterns defined. Countries in a migration system are not only connected by people but also by other types of linkages between countries that stimulate, direct and maintain international flows of people (Fawcett 1989). These might also be non-people linkages. Fawcett classifies them in four categories: 1) the state-to-state relations, 2) mass culture connections, 3) family and personal networks, and 4) migrant agency activities. He furthermore identifies three types of linkages within those categories: 1) tangible linkages, 2) regulatory linkages, and 3) relational linkages. The present analysis will use Fawcett and Arnold's idea regarding the categories of linkages and not the types, as the author mainly aims to discuss the dynamics that occur within the certain migrants group and not to make analyses based on the classification of the linkages by type.

According to Fawcett and Arnold (1987), the migration systems approach has the advantage of focusing attention on both ends of a migration flow, of examining one flow in the context of other flows or one destination as part of a set of alternative destinations. A migration systems approach furthermore reveals the diverse linkages between places such as transactions involving information, goods, services and ideas. The present article focuses on the function of the framework to identify interactions that might be critical for the understanding of the dynamics, referring to the interaction between regulatory linkages and family networks (Fawcett, Arnold 1987). The analysis of the Ukrainian migration dynamics over time will concentrate on 1) the state policies in both countries, their separate national legislations and whether there are state-to-state agreements that either facilitate or discourage migration, 2) social and family networks influence, and 3) other factors, such as intermediaries and mass culture images and information.

With the above in mind, the following four periods can be distinguished in the Ukrainian migration to Greece.

#### *The period before 1991*

Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, marking the end of an important historical period and the rise of a new nation-state. Still, it is important for the sake of the background history of migration to mention that in the mid-1980s, with the introduction of *perestroika* by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last return wave of political emigrants of Greek origin started from the territories of Ukraine (Kaurinkoski 2008).

This last period of emigration, but mainly the reason for it – i.e. the political developments that led to the disintegration of the USSR – coincides with the start of a new type of migration which is not driven by political but by economic reasons, with a mass wave of labour migration in the late 1990s (Malynovska 2004). From a legal perspective, it is nonetheless important to mention the restrictive exit visa regime that applied in the country which existed in Ukraine until January 1993, when the obligation for Ukrainians to apply for exit visas each time when travelling abroad was abolished. The repatriated Greeks, or *palinostoundes* as they are called in Greece, belonged to one of the groups that returned to Greece in the first phase. Also, Ukrainian women who met their Greek spouses in the 1980s while they were students in Ukraine and subsequently got married were amongst the first migrants to settle in Greece.

### *Second period – 1991–1998*

As an introduction to the second period: a representative of the Ukrainian community in Athens, a journalist, remembers that in the first years of the 1990s the Ukrainians were very few people in Greece. *We were gathering for Christmas, for the celebrations, we were 40 people all in all, very few. After 1992–1993 the first migrants appeared mostly from Western Ukraine, because the access was easier*, says Anna in an interview held in 2008.

The second period begins in 1991 when Ukraine declares its independence and, at the same time, the first Law on entrance and work is enacted in Greece, referring to the first migrants who started entering the country after the end of the Cold War. Characteristic for the period is that migrants arrived in Greece with tourist visas which they overstayed in order to start working in the informal labour market, mainly in the sector of domestic care. Although Greece was not a key destination for Ukrainian migrants, it had been among the first Mediterranean countries to receive immigrants since the mid-1990s. A major pull factor was the demand for cheap labour in the informal labour market of Greece, at a time when the rest of the European Union countries implemented restrictive migration policies (Castles, Miller 2003), with the exception of some countries like Italy and Portugal. In brief, the last decade of the 20th century as the transitional period to a free economy in Ukraine brought significant changes, and the sudden collapse of the state system of production led to massive unemployment. After the first few years of poverty, many Ukrainians decided to migrate to the richer Western European countries and *mostly by chance* (Anna, 2008) – at least in the beginning before the networks were established – it was Greece that hosted the first long-term Ukrainian migrants. *Before that all the Ukrainians in Greece had residence permits, but the newcomers were as a whole without papers. Therefore, many people, the majority of them women found themselves in conditions of slavery*, says Anna (2008).

In the first years of the 1990s in Ukraine, the difficulties of day-to-day life due to the sudden changes that people had to deal with, and the corruption of the public authorities and lack of legislation, led to practices of exploitation and the creation of mechanisms and networks in the shadow economy. In that context, an issue arose with major implications for society, namely the trafficking of women from Ukraine for purposes of sexual exploitation. One of the main final destinations for a few years (at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000) was Greece (Hughes, Denisova 2003; Emke-Poulopoulos 2003).

Practices of exploitation were also observed in Greece, when the immigrant women who had assumed the responsibility of financially supporting their families back in Ukraine needed to find jobs. Mainly in Athens, but also in Ukraine, offices were established for the recruitment of low paid domestic workers – cleaners, nurses, baby-sitters – in the informal labour market. Many of these women had difficulties at first on account of the language and their ignorance of how to do things, for instance when searching for a job and how to avoid the risk of being exploited. Most of them worked as domestic workers with one free day in the week.

Their way of coping with the situation was to gather each Sunday on a central square of Athens and to share the problems they had in common, and to obtain reliable information on the legal issues pertaining to residence permits and work insurance. From the start of their arrival in the 1990s until today, migrants find a great source of support in a community formed by Galina Masliuk-Kaku, who also published a newspaper aimed at reliably informing Ukrainians in Greece on all matters relevant to their stay in the country.

### *Third period – 1998–2007*

An important turning point was the implementation of a few regularisation programmes for immigrants who were living and working in Greece without the relevant documents, for the first time in 1998. Most of the Ukrainians had been living and working without residence permits in Greece for years, without expecting that the state would conduct a regularisation programme. When the newspapers of the community started to report the upcoming law, most of the people were suspicious at first. However, after overcoming their fears and applying for a residence permit, the people were subsequently able to improve the quality of their lives and their working conditions. Later on, the residence permits proved important for the Ukrainians as it entitled them to health insurance and allowed them to walk the streets without fear. However, it didn't have any impact on their social status or their opportunities at getting better jobs in other sectors of the economy. In the following years, a total of three regularisation programmes took place – in 2001, in 2005 and in 2007. Despite the heavy administration mechanisms, many Ukrainians managed to obtain residence permits.

As mentioned above, the publication of the results of the population census in 2001 made clear that the number of Ukrainian women prevailed significantly over the number of men. As a result, the researchers focused their attention on investigating that tendency, recognising the women as the breadwinners in their families. The survey of KETHI reveals that in most cases the push factor for the migration are the low incomes in the home-country, but the respondents also reported being attracted to the opportunity to explore another way of life (KETHI 2007). Another strong motivation was the need to support the family and, though less so, the difficulty of finding a job.

### *Fourth period – from 2007 to today*

The fourth period starts in 2007, marked by the end of the regularisation programmes and with another important turning point in 2010, starting with the economic crisis which in some aspects redefines the working and living conditions and the related challenges. In that period most of the Ukrainians are holders of long-term residence permits and are working legally, with social and health insurance. An end to new migration flows to Greece is already evident since 2008, as a result of the combination between the tightened visa regime, signs of stabilisation of the Ukrainian economy and rising salaries, but also the possibility for women to retire in their country – which was not an option in Greece (Nikolova, Marouf 2010).

According to the Greek Ministry of the Interior, in December 2011 the total number of Ukrainians holding a valid residence permit was approximately 17 000, of whom 81 per cent were women. In that period, the reason for staying in the country is obvious from the type of residence permit. Most of the stay permits are: 1) for dependent employment, 2) on the grounds of marriage with EU citizens – mainly with Greeks: approximately 5 500 stay permits, of which 5 000 were issued to women, and 3) long-term residence permits, numbering about 18 per cent. Last but not least, under the Presidential Decree 131/06 on the Harmonisation of the Greek legislation with Directive 2003/86/EC on the right to family reunification, some 1 317 permits were issued for family unification purposes by the end of 2011 (796 to women and 521 to men) (Nikolova 2013).

### Socio-economic characteristics

According to the census of 2011, the Ukrainians in Greece number 17 006 individuals, of which 3 601 are men and 13 405 are women. The data provided by the census point to an increase in the number of Ukrainians in Greece within the timeframe of a decade. After all, the 2001 census had counted 13 500 Ukrainians in total. Despite their shortcomings, census data on immigrants provide the most comprehensive picture of the population (Kasimis 2012). Other reliable sources of data for the number of migrants and the reasons for migration are the residence permit statistics provided by the Ministry of the Interior. It must be noted that the current economic crisis in Greece and growing xenophobia among the citizen population is reported to reduce immigrant registration (Kasimis 2012). In terms of the share of the Ukrainian population in the total of the migrant population, the data from Labour Force Survey for the fourth trimester in 2012 shows that the Ukrainians of working age account for 1.35 per cent of the total, whereas the data for the valid stay permits issued to third-country nationals reveal that the Ukrainians make up 3.79 per cent of the total of registered migrants in December 2012 (Triandafyllidou 2013).

**Table 1. Residence permits per year in 2005–2012**

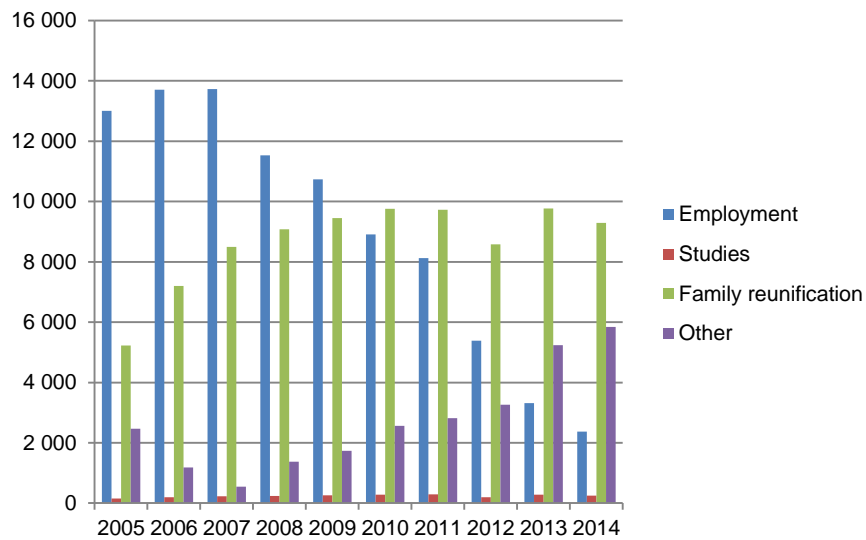
Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Ukraine	20 854	22 295	22 995	22 210	22 178	21 523	20 959	16 698
Total	452 119	547 507	589 086	592 626	610 809	596 241	582 112	440 118

Source: Greek Ministry of the Interior.

According to the data on residence permits issued in the period 2005–2012, a sharp decline in the number of migrants is observed in 2012. As mentioned earlier, in 2005 the third ‘amnesty’ or regularisation programme was implemented, giving irregular migrants the opportunity to obtain residence permits. Consequently, many migrants without documents had the opportunity to register and, in the following years, managed to obtain long-term stay permits.

The types of residence permits granted to the nationals of non-EU countries since 2006 permit ten years of stay. Also, many permits were issued on the grounds of family reunification, which was not as an option before 2006. In August 2014, the total number of Ukrainians holding a valid residence permit was 17 754, with 83 per cent obtained by women. Most of these were issued for family reunification; a significant share are holders of long-term residence permits or ten years with right to employment (in Figure 1 under the category ‘Other’); the third-largest category was clearly on the grounds of employment; and a very low percentage for studies. Under the Presidential Decree 131/06 on the Harmonisation of the Greek legislation with Directive 2003/86/EC on the right to family reunification, some 9 285 permits were issued for family reunification purposes by August 2014 (8 082 to women and 1 203 to men).

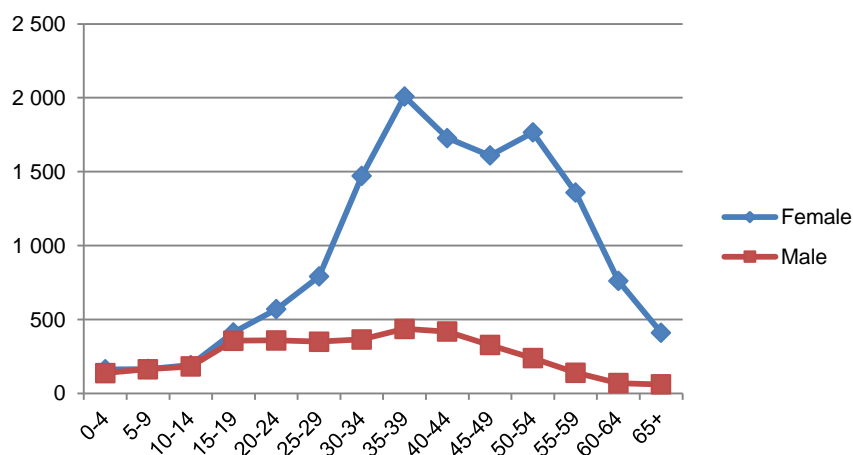
Furthermore, some findings from interviews during the field work, confirmed by the statistics, reveal a cessation of new migration flows. Residence permits do not precisely register trends. The decline in the numbers of documented migrants for Ukrainians (and other migrant groups) may indicate the return of some due to difficulties related to the crisis (one can observe a peak in the number of residence permits in 2009 when the economic crisis was not an issue), but could also reveal the loss of legal status since residence permits are still largely connected to formal employment, which means that if migrants are unemployed they may not be able to renew their residence permits. The unemployment figures among the Ukrainians indicate that the unemployment rates increased to 18 per cent in 2012, and the share of unemployed people over the total migrant population reached over 30 per cent.

**Figure 1. Types of residence permits issued per year in 2005–2014**

Source: Greek Ministry of the Interior.

Estimates by community organisations on the number of Ukrainians in Greece do not differ drastically from official figures, with the remark that the community leaders who were asked for their opinion on the number of population also included those who have acquired Greek citizenship and no longer appear in the statistical data as Ukrainians, while about 3 000 to 5 000 people live and work without proper documents (Interviews with key informant 2 and 3) (Nikolova 2013).

As mentioned above, the population increased over the course of ten years (according to the censuses in 2001 and 2011). The ratio between women and men is visually presented in Figure 2, with the number of women in active age prevailing, making up 81 per cent of the total Ukrainian population.

**Figure 2. Ukrainian population by gender and age in 2011, Census, ELSTAT**

Source: Census 2011, Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT).

Ukrainians were mostly employed in the sectors of domestic work (52 per cent), retail trade and repair of motor vehicles (17.4 per cent), in the period 2007–2012 (LFS, ELSTAT), in hotels and catering establish-

ments (17.4 per cent), and in construction (10.2 per cent). Generally, the Ukrainians remain steadily in the same sectors of employment, with a small exception of increased percentages of those employed in the hotel and catering industry since 2008. The majority of employed Ukrainians are insured. The largest part of the population is concentrated in the area of Athens and its vicinity (60 per cent of the population). There is also a steady number of Ukrainians in the region of Central Macedonia, Peloponnese and the island of Crete. As a general remark, the preferred regions of settlement remain the same, but with an increasing number of migrants in the area of Central Greece. With regard to the origin of the Ukrainians, most of them come from the cities in Western Ukraine – Lviv, Ivano-Frankovsk, Uzhhorod – but also from the central and eastern regions of the country.

The overall educational level of Ukrainians is relatively high, especially of the women. The data from Labour Force Survey for the last trimester of 2012 reveals that one third of Ukrainian immigrant women residing in the country hold degrees of higher technical education, while some four per cent are university graduates (Nikolova 2013). The female character of migration has not changed since the first arrival of Ukrainians in the 1990s. The percentage of women varies between 72 per cent and 82 per cent on the total.

### **Patterns and challenges of remaining**

Given that the Ukrainians are not a homogenous group and each individual follows different patterns of integration into the society, the present article attempts to identify the threats arising from the crisis and the tense socio-economic conditions, their impact on the family plans, and to track the strategies of coping with the present situation. *The main problem of the Ukrainian community is the lack of jobs and that's why the people cannot have social security stamps and medical insurance*, says Tatiana (2013). The threat of losing one's job is followed by decrease in the social security stamps that the migrants pay each month, and if they cannot collect enough insurance stamps, this could eventually lead to a failure to renew their residence permit, thus becoming even more vulnerable.

*It is very difficult to find a job. The companies go bust. For example, this is the third time I am jobless. All the businesses I was working for go bankrupt. Recently, in January (2013), they closed our shop. I have been uninsured for the last one and a half to two years. Of course, I have documents to stay, because my residence permit is for ten years and is valid till 2017. I don't know what I am going to do and what will happen. It is difficult, because if there is no job, there is no health insurance. But, on the fair side, we haven't realised it or faced it yet, because it is still too early. Time will show* (Lina, 2013).

The lack of documents determines the economic activity and the concentration of women in the domestic work niche, according to a 2008 study by Psimmenos and Skamnakis. As a rule, immigrant women make a great effort to regularise their residence status and most of the estimates agree that the Ukrainian community is generally characterised by a very low number of irregular migrants. Despite the changing legislation and the obstacles of the bureaucracy, many Ukrainians managed to get long-term residence permits. Still, one of the issues, even if there are efforts to resolve the problem with legislative initiatives, remains the payment of insurance contributions. A new system of paying the social security contributions through 'ergosimo'<sup>3</sup> introduced not very long ago to address this problem appears to not be very popular. The concern on the part of the employers is that their salaries are cut down, so they reduce the payments of their domestic workers.

*Each employer is saying 'my salary was cut down; I don't have money, so I won't buy ergosimo for you too...' (...) As much as I am aware – those who had paid insurance contributions, they are not entitled to*



*those insurances anymore. Or those who were paying and were always steady with that, now have such reduced salary that they can't manage to pay for it (Tatiana, 2013).*

*When it was self-insurance, it was easier... the employee had insurance. Because of 'ergosimo' things are worse. It's much worse. Because Greeks do not want to buy 'ergosimo,' they do not want this – why? Because of fear... Fear of the tax offices, because they do not want to be found?! Who knows...Some of them do not know what it is, do not want to know, but they say it is messy, others do not have the time to go and buy it. All sorts of excuses... (Sonya, 2013).*

Since 2010, things have somehow settled in the sector of live-in domestic workers from Ukraine. Here, salaries range between 400 to 500 euros. The elder women prefer to work as live-in domestic helpers as it is cheaper for them, while the younger women choose external jobs because of their family commitments mostly. Most women working as domestic helpers, especially live-in, spend years in Greece in the same employment sector. Before the crisis, they were attracted by a fixed salary, on-time payments, permanency of the job and minimum language requirements (Nikolova 2013). But now the wages have been reduced and the migrants who couldn't cope with their living costs preferred to return to Ukraine rather than to look for work as live-in domestic helpers. Most of the women working as maids prefer to send money home for their daughters even in cases when they are grown-up adults with own families, and to forbid them to come to Greece and follow their pattern of living. *'I've tried it, I do not want my children to do that', is what the women say. But those who are really poor are still coming; God forbid, if someone gets sick in the family and the family needs more money, then girls come from there, yes,* says Sonia from the Ukrainian community (2013).

If one considers that most of the Ukrainians were successfully issued ten-year residence permits in the first years after 2007, it means that they have a more extensive timeframe to find a solution and re-think their plans in case of losing their job in Greece. Still, thinking pro-actively, the migrants still worry about the issue of renewing their residence permit when that time comes around. The Ukrainian families also worry about the process of the re-integration of their children in the homeland in case of their return. In 2009 there was one Ukrainian school working on a weekly basis, and by 2013 three schools were offering training in language and knowledge of the history and geography of Ukraine. *There is a need. Many parents thought that they might have to return to Ukraine and they have turned to the Ukrainian schools. Whereas, five to ten years ago, many immigrants living in Greece thought that it is enough for their children to go to Greek school only,* says Tatiana (2013), who is director of a Sunday school.

The results of a research conducted in Greece in 2008 by Nikolova and Maroufof (2010) revealed that the women engaged in domestic work without residence permits in Greece face obstacles in their access to public services, which restricts their movement and their interaction with friends and relatives, which also has a direct impact on their relationships with families left behind in Ukraine. Lacking official documents for stay and work for years on end has had, as an indirect consequence, a rising number of divorces and a lack of options to be officially reunited with their children, that is, to invite them for visits or to live in Greece with them. Some of the women managed years ago to bring their children by other means, thus not through the official way of family reunification, which has repercussions in the present day when the children have become independent family members: *Because they came without visa, afterwards they can't apply for a residence permit. But also they can't return, because they are strangers there and their families are here,* Tatiana (2013) says.

*Those years when they needed to go and be with their children, they couldn't... it's a drama. Now it is easier for the children to come. Many migrants bring their children for a month, before they would do the same, but they were not letting them. In some cases women hadn't seen their children for four to five years. It is not easy for a woman to work here without support. Even the families of the employers were accepting the children for a month in the summer to stay in their houses with the parent. Because when the person is happy, things work better (Anna, 2013).*

One very important issue for the migrants is to keep as much as possible a firm relationship with their families back home, as was already highlighted above. Most of the time, they prefer to invite their relatives to visit them rather than to go back home. Some years ago it was much difficult to obtain visa from the Greek consulate, but according to monitoring reports of the Ukrainian organisation Europe Without Barriers, lately Greek consulates are among the top five consulates in Ukraine in terms of speed of processing documents and a drop in the refusals (Europe Without Barriers 2014).

### **Patterns and challenges of return**

The decision to return appears to be planned and organised much longer before the actual return, if it happens. If it could be compared with the period that passes between the initial decision to migrate from Ukraine and the act of departing and arriving in Greece, it seems to be much better scheduled and the people seem to prepare themselves and their family much longer for the return. Also, it seems that the factors which have impact on the decision to migrate to a foreign country are mostly due to unemployment, low wages, support for the family, etc., but the factors prompting a return are mostly internal and psychological, driven by deeper individual needs or ambitions. This can also be claimed to apply to factors driving an eventual re-migration back to Greece, as the arguments below indicate. Basically, there are two distinct and crucial elements which are basic to the analysis of the decision-making before migrating, returning or re-migrating: the timeframe for the organisation of the journey and the perception of the possible future impact on their life of some external factors.

The signs of the coming economic crisis gradually appeared during the second half of the 2000s, beginning with a downturn in the construction sector, where many migrant men were either losing their jobs or their monthly wages decreased or the working days per month were reduced. One of the characteristics of the last period of Ukrainian migration to Greece (starting in 2007) is the return of migrants back home, while Greece is no longer a destination for new Ukrainian migrants.

According to recent research, female immigrants engaged in domestic work who came to Greece as early as in the 1990s tend to remain in the country, while even if they return to Ukraine this is often for a short period of time before coming back to Greece (Levchenko, Malynovska, Shvab, Trofymenko 2010). *The men are those who are leaving. Also elder women return, those who work as domestic helpers. Or, those who are without documents, or don't want to obtain residence permits. Or who lose their jobs. But those who have residence permits are also leaving nowadays*, says Tatiana (2013). The situation seems to have been uncertain even before the outbreak of instability and violence in Ukraine, and some degree of movements 'back and forth' seem to occur once long-term legal status has been obtained (as in the case of older women who may return for a while and then move back to Greece).

Later arrivals (in 2006–2007) stayed for a shorter period and nearly all returned, with men more often than women tending to spend shorter periods of working in Greece, usually about three years or less, to then return to Ukraine (Levchenko *et al.* 2010). As the financial crisis intensified since 2010, Ukrainians found it harder to keep their jobs or to find new ones, which may explain the outflow of many families to Ukraine.

According to a representative of the Ukrainian community in Greece, the families followed several strategies to cope with the crisis. One interviewee mentioned cases of mixed families (Ukrainian women with their Greek partners) departing to Ukraine with the aim to settle there (Interview with key informant 4). In this respect, a common strategy to prepare for a smooth return to Ukraine is to send children to a Ukrainian school in Athens, in order to learn the language, so the children will be more prepared for the new environment upon return.

Some families returned to Ukraine and appeared unable to adjust psychologically, so that led them back to Greece. *After 15 years spent in Greece, a family went back to Ukraine aiming to remain there, but after two months they came back. They faced difficulties to adjust to the new ways of doing things in Ukraine, so they preferred to return to Greece and to try to handle their lives here, rather than to be oppressed by their own fellow citizens there* (Interview with key informant 4). Many of those who left for Ukraine held long-term residence permits from Greece, so they had some time for a trial period in Ukraine, leaving the door open in case they should wish to return to Greece (Nikolova 2013). Migrants might be reluctant to return because they have developed new habits and a way of living, which in different studies of Ukrainian migration is associated with the duration of stay as a decisive factor.

According to some interviewees (Interview with key informant 2), some older women who return to Ukraine tend to come back to Greece after a short period of time, because they are used to the way of life there and still have the opportunity to work as domestic helpers for about 400 euros a month. In another case, an elderly woman – mother of an interviewee – returned because her spouse needed care. In 2010 she had obtained a residence permit for ten years, but it is *almost definite that she will not return*, says her daughter Iryna (Interview with key informant 7). The parents of Iryna in Ukraine have pensions – *per month they receive approximately 260 euros which is enough for them, because they don't have other expenses*, she explains. In addition, the mother has worked 15 years in Greece paying her social security contributions and according to Iryna, she expects to receive a small pension from Greece when she turns 67. That story is one of the many for women over 55 who tend to return to their homeland. *Before the return, my mother was saving money to have for an emergency situation, she didn't go back with nothing in her pocket* (Interview with key informant 7).

The case of the young single women is different. If they don't find employment in 'external' jobs, they prefer to leave for Ukraine and in some cases from there to re-migrate either to Poland for seasonal agricultural jobs, or in other cases to Russia, as baby-sitters or domestic helpers (Interview with key informant 2).

### **Concluding remarks**

During the first period of migration, with the abolition of the obligation to obtain an exit visa, the Ukrainians started to migrate firstly for a short period of time to the neighbouring countries and later to more distant destinations. Greece was the first of the Mediterranean countries to host Ukrainian labour migrants in 1993. It seems that at first, the newcomers somehow randomly decided to choose Greece as a destination, but then it became easier to obtain visa in the 1990s and it was also cheaper through the whole package of services provided by tourist offices. The labour immigrants in Greece stayed for a few years without documents until 1998, when the first regularisation law was enacted by Parliament. In the next years, a few amnesty programmes were implemented and most of the Ukrainians managed to obtain residence and work permits. That gave them the freedom of movement in the cities, without fear of being arrested and deported back, and it also gave them access to labour and social rights and allowed them to travel back and forth for the summer holidays or for family reasons.

In the middle of the decade of 2000, many migrants were still entering the country for work, but in most cases they chose Greece because they had relatives there and at least initially could rely on their support. At that period the laws in Greece were favourable for the regularisation of the migrant population that had already settled in the territory, but at the same time the state tightened its visa policies. Possibly, the Ukrainians who came after 2007 were not keen to work in the grey economy – hard physical work for low pay – because the quality of life in Ukraine had improved, and so the basis of comparison changed the terms of negotiations.

After 2007, many Ukrainians managed to obtain ten-year residence permits. Many of them returned to Ukraine, especially families and elderly women. The families tend to return for economic or emotional reasons, and the elderly women usually for family reasons. In that respect, the long-term residence permit is favourable, as people in vulnerable situations – be it through unemployment or for family reasons – have the option of returning for some time to Ukraine, but being able to go back to Greece in a legal manner. As both the primary and secondary research show, return remains problematic for many migrants as long as there is no suitable economic environment in Ukraine. Further crucial factors that motivate them to go back to Greece again are the economic and political conditions in the home country. The legislation of the European Directive on family reunification has been important for the migrants, as it helped preserve the unity of the family and enabled them to take decisions while together in the same place. We may therefore note, at a general level, that the family reunification and the long-term residence permits are probably the two most important legislative provisions for both the mobility and temporality of the migration. These afford the migrant with both the opportunity and the timeframe to make a well-considered choice, motivated by his or her own perceptions of well-being in the old *versus* the new home country.

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### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> *IDEA Mediterranean and Eastern European Countries as New Immigration Destinations in the European Union*, funded by the European Commission Research DG, Sixth Framework Programme, Thematic Priority 8.1 – Policy-Oriented Research – Scientific Support to Policies. See more at: <http://www.eliamep.gr/en/category/migration/idea/#sthash.pflAG2Xv.dpuf>.

<sup>3</sup> *With the provision of Article 24 of Law 3863/2010, for the first time the system of paying social contributions through 'ergosimo' was introduced. This brought significant changes in the way of wage and insurance payments for the employees in the sector of domestic work who perform work paid by the hour or by the day, on a regular basis, either to one or to more than one employer for the same payroll period covered by IKA insurance. The same applies to workers in the sector of agriculture covered by OGA insurance... The 'ergosimo' corresponds to a specific monetary value which includes the amount of the employee's remuneration and the amount of contributions to the social security institution.* Gamvroudi V. (November 2011). *Journal Epitheorisis IKA – Insurance and Labour Laws*. Online: <http://www.eaed.gr/>

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