Transit in Europe: The Case of Greece

Bèrcan
We didn’t know anyone in Greece, or anywhere else for that matter. But if you want to find a kaça­kçı ['smuggler’ in Turkish], there are so many around it is very easy, and they give you information about where to go, what to do, everything. But you know what, they promise you that in Greece there will be accommodation in a reception centre and jobs and social benefits ... and there is nothing like that. We knew nothing, just rumours, and we came here and found out the truth.

The main problem is that when you arrive, and from the time you apply until you get recognized [as a refugee], you have no coverage. You get the ‘police note’ and for six months you are like nothing here, you cannot work legally, if they arrest you this paper is no protection. And then after the interview, they examine your case and let you know, maybe in another six months. So you are not covered for at least one or two years. In other countries they do this much faster. We thought we were coming to Europe, but this is very far from what we expected.

Yes, I have a refugee status now. It was a very tiring procedure. I applied, was rejected, made an appeal, was rejected, second appeal, in the end I got the refugee status. I applied in 1998 and got asylum in 2001. I had almost given up by that time. My brother came to Greece as well; he stayed two years waiting for his papers, and then at some point he was frustrated from waiting and decided to leave and he went to Sweden. He called me and said that his papers were done within a day, and that it was great there.

It’s been some years in Athens now ... in the past we thought of leaving, to go to Sweden, or the UK or Canada. But now is too late.
We don’t care about going elsewhere anymore, we are fine here, we have a place to stay, we have made friends ... This way or the other, we will earn a living. I don’t think it will be any different in Sweden, in Holland or anywhere. I would do the same things and live this type of life anyway. And people will not be any better, I am sure. I really cannot start from scratch now.

It’s just a matter of how you feel here, how much you care that the state does not give you anything, that things are so informal and you have to survive on your own. If you get used to that, you stay, if not, you go. And if you have started a life here, well, you stay.

You know, we had different plans, my husband and me ... I wanted to study, become something. Here I am nothing, and I will always be nothing. My husband was an artist back home, now he is nothing. He works in a sweatshop. But I wanted him to become something, be known. There is no present for us here, and there is no future. When you are a refugee, this is how it is, there is no present, no future, only past.

(Kurd, interview in Athens, January 2002)

3.1 Greece: destination and transit

Greece is usually not pictured as a migration hub in the international media, definitely not as much as Italy and Spain, which seem to monopolize all the attention in the Mediterranean. Some studies on the Mediterranean even fail to make a reference to the country at all. Nevertheless, the numbers of irregular migrants arriving in Greece are equally large. In the year 2007, Greece was the third most popular destination country for asylum seekers in the industrialized world with 14,700 applications, and received far more asylum seekers than any other Mediterranean or Western European country (UNHCR, 2007a).

A number of reasons make Greece a popular destination and transit country. Geography is one of them. Positioned at the south-eastern end of Europe, Greece is a Schengen country sharing land borders with some of the migrant source countries (Turkey, Bulgaria, Albania). Greece has the longest coastline in Europe, about 16,000 km, which is almost three times that of Spain and slightly longer than that of China, and includes 3000 islands and islets. However, geographical reasons alone cannot explain the phenomenon. Greek migration policy does not give opportunities for long-term settlement, and asylum policy is extremely restrictive, making it almost impossible for refugees to receive effective