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*From open markets to Russian products stores  
to “big business”:  
Economics and ethics in Pontic Greek communities  
of Thessaloniki after the Soviet experience*

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**From open markets, to Russian products stores, to “big business”: Economies and ethics in Pontic Greek communities of Thessaloniki after the Soviet experience**

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# **From open markets, to Russian products stores, to “big business”: Economies and ethics in Pontic Greek communities of Thessaloniki after the Soviet experience**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the development of economic practices within diasporic networks of Greeks from the former Soviet Union (FSU). It focuses on the period after 1990 when more than 150,000 ethnic Greeks from the FSU migrated to Greece, and mainly on migrants that settled in Thessaloniki and its suburbs. It argues that diasporic networks played a crucial role not only in survival strategies of the newcomers via solidarity but also in the development of both small and large-scale economic activities. Local labour markets, entrepreneurship and capital accumulation of Greeks from the FSU are socially embedded and conditioned by the structure of diasporic networks and by the interaction of the latter with economic agents in the country of origin. Based mainly on life-story narratives, this paper traces the development of economic networks since the arrival of the first migrants in early 90s to the gradual emergence of transnational economic activities and big businesses owned by some prominent Greek-Russian businessmen. Though not linear, these activities seem to rely on mutations of both transnational economic and diasporic networks, and have been legitimated by community work ethics.

**Keywords:** Former Soviet Union diasporas, Greek diaspora, transnational networks, diasporic economy, embeddedness

## **Introduction**

Between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than 150,000 ethnic Greeks living in various regions of the FSU migrated to Greece (Voutira, 2004). Though few had any ties to Greece, many still considered it an “eternal homeland”. The migration was mostly sudden and massive, it took place mainly between 1990 and 1993, and it can be considered a collective, rather than an individually, calculated decision (Pratsinakis, 2013). As Voutira observes, this led to large-scale family migration and finally to the complete relocation of kinship or locality-based networks (Voutira, 1991).

The majority of immigrants (60%) settled on the region of Macedonia and half of those stayed in the city of Thessaloniki (33%). Despite the incentives given by the Greek government during the first half of the 90s to encourage migrants to settle in under populated rural zones in the department of Thrace, newcomers seemed to prefer urban areas where the employment opportunities were much higher and diasporic networks were gradually formed (Voutira, 2004).

In this paper we discuss some of the first results of an ongoing research project on the development and transformation of the economic activities of Greek migrants from the FSU in Thessaloniki<sup>1</sup>. We aim to assess how economic practices evolve within diasporic networks and how they are affected by socio-economic developments in both countries of origin and destination. In the first part of this paper the methodological and theoretical framework of our research is discussed. In the main part of the article we firstly analyse the development of the first diasporic networks in Thessaloniki and economic activities including retail, construction, the fur trade and trade in open markets<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, we discuss the development of a more sophisticated and capital-accumulation oriented activity, namely the Russian products market. Finally, we examine the role of prominent Pontic Greek businessmen within diasporic networks and their important role in the business activities of the diasporic networks.

## Theoretical and historical framework

While diasporic networks from the FSU are mostly studied in terms of social identities and political and social integration (Voutira, 2006; Voutira, 2004; Pratsinakis, 2013; Lavrentiadou, 2006; Vergeti, 1998; Vergeti, 2010; Chaliapa, 2009; Karanou, 2003), our aim here is to analyse the networks of migrants from the FSU as frameworks of economic activity. The focus is on how these networks serve as fields of economic action and social reproduction within (inter)national market economies. Our main argument is that the way economic activities take place and change over time is affected by the structure of the diasporic networks of Greek migrants from the FSU, forming transnational communities (Tsakiri, 2005) which exchange goods, information and human resources in order to survive or to improve their economic and social status. As Anton Popov notes about migrants from Gaverdovskii and Vitiazevo, FSU Greeks establish their own transnational circuits and continue to travel between Greece and Russia as an economic and social reproduction strategy (Popov, 2016).

Voutira also notes that as part of livelihood and social reproduction strategies, some migrant families do not abandon their former identities and affiliations. Instead, they use these, to some extent, to invest in the country of origin (e.g., real estate investments) or develop business activities between the two countries. In this framework they co-exist in two national spaces drawing some advantages from each, not only in economic terms but also in terms of social protection and benefits (Voutira, 2004). This strategy offers not only flexibility

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<sup>1</sup> "This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund-ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020» in the context of the project "From Popular Markets to Family Businesses and to Russian Markets: an Horizontal Economy of the 'Poor' as a Survival Strategy of the Returnees from the Former Soviet Union from mid-80s until Today" (MIS 5007303)."



Operational Programme  
Human Resources Development,  
Education and Lifelong Learning  
Co-financed by Greece and the European Union



<sup>2</sup>The so-called "popular" markets (*λαϊκές αγορές*) in Greece

in economic strategies but also demonstrates the role of transnational capital mobility within the diasporic networks. The ability of some Pontic Greek migrants to move between two homelands and participate in economic networks in both countries is central to the way practices are shifting from survival economic strategies to reproduction strategies of investment. These migrants seem, thus, to accumulate a sort of migratory capital, which includes different types of 'know-how', such as knowledge of transport networks, facility with authorities and bureaucracies and access to different labour markets.

Local labour markets, entrepreneurship and capital accumulation of the migrants are informed by diasporic networks and by the interaction of the latter with economic agents in the country of origin. We will try to describe, therefore, the way repatriates build their economic activities within these networks. In other words, in order to understand how individuals and their families work and develop their economic activities we have to examine not only how they interact among them, but also their economic background and relations with their homeland. Survival and livelihood strategies of the repatriates are thus embedded in diasporic networks that structure local markets and economic interactions. In this aspect we second Granovetter (1985) when he remarks that economy is not an atomised action outside its social context but is embedded in concrete and ongoing systems of social relations.

At the same time, we would like to emphasise the fact that the economy of the diaspora cannot be seen as a separate entity from the national and international economy. If local economic activities are affected by the way diasporic networks are structured, they are also dependent on global economic transformations. The transformations of the economy of the repatriates take place within a changing framework of Greek capitalism and are affected on the one hand by transnational capital movements, and on the other hand by economic crises in the host country or the country of origin. These conditions which lead to the emergence of Greek-Russian capitalists acting in both Greek and Russian economic environments provoked important mutations of the diasporic economy itself. However, these mutations do not simply reflect transformations of the national and international markets. Local economies are subject to the way repatriates conceive and structure their relations with their peers and to moral values and judgements about work, entrepreneurship, livelihood and social reproduction. As Thompson (1993) and (later) Fassin (2009) remind us, individuals and social groups think and act according to a nexus of conceptions and beliefs about what is right or wrong, justifiable or not. Therefore, they invite us to examine the social norms and obligations that underpin economic practices. In the case of Greeks from the FSU, both survival and entrepreneurship are affected by a 'moral economy' of the diasporic networks to the extent that they refer not only to the moral obligation of helping those in need, but to a specific ethic in work and trade.

Throughout our research we intend to demonstrate transformations and ruptures in economic activity of FSU migrants, from the beginning of 90s to the present. Our goal is to show how general conditions affect the economic activity of the group and the degree to which possible transformations take place. Based on material from fieldwork and life-story narratives in this paper, we examine forms and levels of economic activity which are not

necessarily linear or evolutionary; thus, a strict periodicity of events would be challenging. However, from the very first readings and talks with our informants, we discovered that the absence of any regulation of the Russian market during the 90s helped Greek transnational capital flourish, when 'tchelnotshestvo'<sup>3</sup> was at its height. Its gradual fall in Putin's era turned out to be critical for FSU Greek migrants who had to find other means of survival or other 'markets' to invest in, not to mention the historical course of Greek capitalism during the 90s and the explosion of construction sector, in which many migrants participated, either as workers or contractors. Radical mutations in the Greek economy, especially after the crisis, also affected the way migrants conceive their economic livelihood and contributed to a redefinition of solidarity and evolving moral stances in reaction to these new realities. In any case, even if our analysis here seems to be based on several grades of economic development of FSU Greek migrants, it is not de-historicised; on the contrary, we have tried to examine economic behaviours within the general framework of the mutations of Greek and Russian economies showing how livelihood and entrepreneurship is embedded in a transnational economic framework. Therefore, the late emergence of big businesses should be understood in this fluid and developing framework.

## **Methodology**

Our choice to focus on Northern Greece, and the Thessaloniki region in particular, results mainly from the importance of migrant flows to this region, along with the fact that Thessaloniki is also the base to some of the most prominent businessmen of the Soviet Greek diaspora such as Ivan Savvidis and Boris Mouzenidis, whose activities will be presented later in this paper. Despite its importance, the number of studies on the post-Soviet diasporas in Greece focusing on that region is rather limited and rarely address the economic implications of diasporic networks<sup>4</sup>. Concerning our data collection, this paper is based primarily on 10 semi-structured interviews (a total of 20 interviews is projected by the end of the research program) with migrants living in Thessaloniki, most of who married in Greece during the early 90s at a period when migration from the FSU was at its peak. Our research participants were chosen mainly according to the development of their professional career and work and the sample is characterised by considerable diversity including people who have worked in open markets (λαϊκές), the construction sector, the "ruskie produkty" (Russian product stores) or are employees of bigger companies owned by Greeks from the FSU originating from Pontus region<sup>5</sup>. Our objective is not only to learn through personal life-history narratives how

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<sup>3</sup> The closer term in English language is "shuttling", a very common practice in Yeltsin's Russia. It was a kind of informal commerce developed by individuals who traveled in all corners of Russia, the ex-Soviet Asian Republics, Turkey and Greece, selling products in open-air markets.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have done excellent field work in Thessaloniki, however their approach was more focused on identity issues, or even anthropogeography (see Pratsinakis, 2013 and Kourti & Katsavounidou, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Even though the majority of our informants originate from the Pontus region, we mostly refer to them as Greeks from the FSU to avoid implying that all FSU Greek migrants are of Pontic origin. In any case, the question

Greek diaspora from the FSU affects livelihood strategies and economic activities, but also to trace how these activities have changed over the years and within a developing transnational framework.

In parallel, our study is based on material and information gathered during fieldwork conducted by one of the researchers while employed for several months in a real estate company owned by a Pontic Greek entrepreneur. This fieldwork offered important insights into how family structures and diasporic community networks affect working relations and recruitment strategies, as the company recruits mainly either members of the extended family of the owner or members of the diasporic community. It also allowed us to better understand how Greek entrepreneurs from the FSU conceive of their businesses and their place within transnational networks. Lastly, in terms of primary source material, we also consulted business registries of several municipal authorities in Thessaloniki in order to learn more about the number and the nature of businesses created by Greeks from the FSU.

### **Northern Greece and Thessaloniki: work communities and capitalist ethics**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the mass flow of refugees and migrants to Greece, there were thousands that chose Thessaloniki as their region of settlement. This was mainly because members of their family or the community had already settled in the city<sup>6</sup>, but also for economic purposes as the labour market in industry and construction offered some opportunities for employment<sup>7</sup>. By the end of 90s, more than 50,000 people who had left the FSU lived in Thessaloniki, mainly in the western parts of the city (Polikhni, Neapoli, Sykies, Stavroupoli, Evosmos, Evkarpia, Kordelio, Menemeni, etc.). The first diasporic networks played an important role in the first period of settlement and throughout the 'normalisation' of life conditions. Solidarity networks that kept growing, informal or organised ones, offered important economic support through loans or other exchanges through the *gift* scheme (Mauss, 2011). Lavrentiadou uses the term 'moral community' (*ήθος της ομάδας*) to describe the confidence and the sympathy between these refugees who lend money or share modest accommodations and help one another while living in conditions of poverty (Lavrentiadou, 2006). Popov speaks of 'transnational families', who, crossing borders, give and receive gifts and favours (Popov, 2016).

During the 90s, the Greeks that stayed behind (in post-Soviet successor democracies) often organised solidarity missions, collecting foodstuff and sending packages to their poor

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of the identity of these populations is complex as it implicates both top-down definitions coming from the Greek state and social interaction imperatives between them and local Greeks (see Voutira, 2004 and Pratsinakis, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> According to E. Voutira, post-Soviet Greek refugees chose their sites of relocation based on where their people (svoj) chose or intended to go (See Voutira, 2006.)

<sup>7</sup> According to the census of 1999-2000 in the Macedonia region, 46% of post-Soviet Greek refugees worked in industrial or craft sector: *The identity of returnees emigrants from ex-Soviet Union*, Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace, Thessaloniki, December 2000, p. 124.

compatriots in Greece, and vice versa. The mutual help and the cooperatives between family members were part of the survival strategies and reproduction tactics. Migration relied heavily on family and kinship (Voutira, 2011), notably during the first period of settlement in Thessaloniki. Even today, as in the 90s, the choice of place for settlement and the nature of economic activities depends on where family and relatives live. Besides, family and solidarity networks help diasporic communities to cope with multiple hardships and to face the difficulties of integration. On the one hand, the integration of Greeks of the FSU into the local labour market was not easy due to their insufficient level of knowledge of Greek language, alongside the fact their diplomas and degrees from FSU schools and universities were not widely accepted. The official recognition of these degrees as equivalents with the Greek ones by the Greek Ministry of Education sometimes required long waiting periods, thus making their recruitment in public or private sector jobs in the Greek labour market more difficult (Glytsos, 1995). Therefore, Greeks from the FSU often ended up in jobs below their qualifications and lower-paid compared to those available for native Greeks. Social marginalisation due to employment status and low revenues was often aggravated by discrimination. As Pratsinakis argues, native Greeks contested the ‘Greekness’ of Greeks from the FSU considering them to be ‘false Greeks’ whose culture, language and habits differed substantially from native, ‘true’ Greeks (Pratsinakis, 2017)<sup>8</sup>.

N. T. is not a typical example of a FSU Greek who had the chance to study, work and then run his own business until the eruption of the crisis. Worker, craftsman, chief-craftsman (*αρχιμάστορας*) and subcontractor, he worked mainly in the construction sector. He came from Moscow in 1993 and settled in Thessaloniki (Eptalofos region) as friends and family were already settled in the city and job opportunities flourished. As he admits, in the beginning, the solidarity between FSU Greeks was considerable. These solidarity networks served also as a framework for some commercial activities. It is not surprising that kinship or friendship relations were the base for developing ‘companies of trust’ that led to work-ethnic communities and new business networks. When he wanted to start his own business in the construction sector, it was necessary for him to collaborate with a close friend not because he was also Pontic Greek, but mostly because he was ‘a man of trust’ because ‘people support the ones who know’<sup>9</sup>.

The ‘solidarity partnerships’ soon created more extended business networks between FSU Greeks and those who stayed back in the FSU. As a result, commercial activity, especially in late 90s flourished. These commercial activities are, according to N. T., a characteristic of the collective identity of FSU Greeks due to their cooperative spirit and partnership. This commercial spirit was ‘kept alive inside them’ during the communist era and Greece, a market economy, was now a favoured place to develop it.

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<sup>8</sup>Native Greeks preferred to refer to Greeks from the FSU by the term ‘Russo-Pontians’, literally Pontians from Russia, which through time, acquired a pejorative meaning also indicating a doubt of their “Greekness” (see Pratsinakis, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the observations of M. Granovetter (1985, p489-490) on trust and entrepreneurship within networks.

We exported fruits to Russia, even in 1993. In the beginning, there was confidence between them. Someone loaded goods here and sent them there. His partner sold the goods and sent the money back. But later, I do not know what happened: they started to send rotten fruits and that type of business failed...The most profitable business was related with furs. One of the partners bought furs with credit and sent them to Russia. The other sold them and sent the money back to Greece. The partners were Pontic Greeks, the buyers were Russians. [N.T.]

The fur market is one of the activities that, according to N.T., many FSU Greek migrants were involved in Northern Greece. Low cost quality fur was one of the most profitable businesses with extended networks of agents like fabricants, truckers, sellers, advertisers, tourist agents and many more. A lawless activity in the beginning<sup>10</sup>, it lost ground gradually, mostly because of the general crises that affected Greek economy. It seems in general that these activities were dependent on the mutations of national and international economy as commercial goods changed according to prices and profit margins. N. T. remarks that his professional career was affected by the general economic conditions. He decided to quit the building sector in 2013 as the ongoing 'Greek crisis' heavily hit the construction industry. He became an employee of Boris Mouzenidis, one of the most prominent Pontic Greek businessmen. This decision was not by accident; after the construction boom during the Athens Olympic Games of 2004, the construction sector in Greece started to shrink, and worsened during the 'crisis' period<sup>11</sup>.

Open markets are another very important and work-ethic community activity of the newcomers throughout Greece. Using their family or friend networks to gain insider information before coming in Greece, many FSU Pontic Greeks had already prepared their personal or household goods for sale in open markets. At that time, it was impossible to transfer or exchange large amounts of roubles, so those who were selling their houses had to convert money into other products in order to transfer them in Greece. Thus, they started to buy household products (sheets, tablecloths, etc.) from the Russian market in order to start selling them once in Greece. The amount of 20-30,000 roubles<sup>12</sup> that most of them obtained after selling their houses could be transformed in much larger amounts in drachmas once the bought products were sold in Greece. But was this primary merchandise for sale enough to sustain a long-term economic activity?

According to P. S., who came in Greece in 1971<sup>13</sup> and started working in open markets in 1990 through today, these markets were not a commercial activity but a survival strategy, mainly in the first years of settlement for newcomers in Greece. Many of them transformed this survival strategy to a commercial one, returning back periodically to the FSU in order to

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<sup>10</sup> A literary representation of this activity is offered by Alexandros Dionysiadis in his *History of my family: the autobiographical drama of a Pontic Greek*, Agathaggelos, Thessaloniki, 2016 (trsnl. from Russian to Greek)

<sup>11</sup> More info at IOBE (Institute of Economic and Industrial Research, <http://iobe.gr>) and their annual reports entitled: *Indicators of Economic Condition*.

<sup>12</sup> Approximatively and always according to the house.

<sup>13</sup> He was one of the FSU Greeks that came before the massive waves of 1992-1993 but started working in open markets later on.

buy more products which were consequently transported along with the household effects of other families that were willing to emigrate in order to avoid customs declaration. Given that in this type of economic activity stable networks between Greek returnees and those who stayed behind were not that frequent, sellers visited Russia or other post-Soviet states individually and searched for stocks or warehouses in order to buy goods at a low price. They developed business relations with the warehouse directors who usually prepaid for some goods from the state. They then resold the stock to their clients at two or three times mark-up. Pontic Greeks took full advantage of these conditions in the FSU during the 90s. This led to the surprising growth of a kind of "merchant capitalism" in which they worked as independent 'shuttlers', one of the categories of traders in Yeltsin's Russia, according to Humphrey (1999). The economic activity in open markets started to decline when it ceased to be considered fruitful, mainly because of the global economic mutations in Greece, Russia and other ex-Soviet Republics<sup>14</sup>.

As P.S. explains, by the end of the 90s, Russian and eastern markets started to stabilise, salaries and the price of goods both increased as well. Nowadays, goods in Russia are often even more expensive than in Greece. People who remained steadfast participants in open markets also enjoyed a marked economic upswing. The most important activity was the selling of various goods at "πανηγύρια"<sup>15</sup>, a seasonal activity. Apart from different types of open market businesses, local groceries, bakeries and small restaurants that opened in the regions of settlement in western borders of Thessaloniki by FSU Greeks, the advent – and now, "explosion" - of "rysskieprodukty" stores<sup>16</sup> is an important chapter in the historical framework of their economic action.

N. A., a woman from Russia with Jewish origins, and her husband, a Pontic Greek from the village Mertsan of Krasnodar region, started their business in Thessaloniki's Kordelio in 1997. At the beginning they set up a kiosk with Greek products, but that soon failed. After a brief reassessment of the particular needs of the neighbourhood, they switched their business to a "rysskieprodukty" store, which became one of the most popular in the region. In the current state of play, this family business has expanded and they now own and manage four different stores all in regions with Pontic or Russian-speaking populations: Kordelio, Ksirokrini, Evosmos and Kalamaria. This shift to an expansive, rather than survival economic activity, seems also related to generational shifts of migration. As N.A. told us, while migration to Greece constituted, for her parents' generation, mainly a symbolic return to the homeland, for her own generation migration had purely economic motivations. Already having experience with this kind of economic venture, they decided to start from scratch in

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<sup>14</sup> According to Zabyelina and her study on the Cherkizovsky market, the shuttlers' economy started to lose ground gradually after the 1998 Russian crisis and declined further after 2004 due to several reasons, one of which was falling sales (Zabyelina, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Even if this "religious" feast was also present in all Pontic Greek communities of the Black sea region in the past, better known there as 'παναίρι'- in Greece the more "religious" or "ritualistic" character seems to be insignificant: "Πανηγύρια" still remain a commercial gathering of small traders who take advantage of specific calendar feasts mainly in rural areas.

<sup>16</sup> Stores that sell exclusively Russian products, in the beginning at least.

Greece with a 'rysskie produkty' store. The 'rysskie produkty' stores, like the ones of N. A.'s family, came to stay, and even today they cater to not only Pontic Greeks, but to all people who have ties to the FSU and are nostalgic for the traditional tastes of their patria (food memorabilia)<sup>17</sup>.

One emerging question is whether 'rysskie produkty', or other food stores (bakeries, etc.), constituted for Pontic Greeks the professionalisation of their business in open markets -in other words, the "next step" in low-scale capitalist businesses in Greece. While it is true that these stores existed from the early 90s along with businesses in open markets, the explosion of "Russian product stores" that took place after 2000s and continues today, coincided with a decline of the businesses in open markets<sup>18</sup>. This correlation leaves some space for further research on this hypothesis. Russian products stores seem to be indeed a more refined and organised commercial activity than the businesses in open markets - even though according to P. S., Russian goods are not at all "Russian", since very few among them are produced in the FSU.

Many products in "ruskie produkty" stores are homemade in Greece. All pasta varieties are produced here, all pickles also. From Russia they import almost nothing. Russian salami "servilat" is produced here in Lamia. A Pontic Greek went to a laboratory there and asked to fabricate "servilat", and they made it for him!

The involvement of Pontic Greeks in the retail sale of food is enormous. The Mixmarkt group, with 293 "Slavic" stores throughout Europe, including several stores in Thessaloniki and Khalkidiki, is controlled and managed (in Greece) by Pontic Greeks from the FSU. However, the business networks seem to be more "post-Soviet" than "Russian" or "Pontic": companies like Luckmann Food Group in Germany's Baden which supplies (and controls through financing to a certain degree) various 'ruskie produkty' in Greece, was founded by post-Soviet diasporas. According to N. A., Luckmann Food Group owners come from the German diaspora of Kazakhstan. Other companies, like Greek 'Aspik' meat products, have their origins in the Czech Republic. It is not difficult to understand that in an early stage, Greek migrants from the FSU, who invested in 'ruskie produkty' stores were integrated in a more extended, Europeanised, business network. This type of business network was characterised by the use of Russian as the language that connected and connects, clients, producers, sellers and businessmen of food sector. Far more than having Pontic origins, knowledge of the Russian language was and is the essential element for someone who wants to work in that business.

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<sup>17</sup> See the very interesting study of Anna Pechurina, "National Food, Belonging, and identity among Russian-speaking migrants in the UK", in Polese A., Morris J. (eds.), *From Identity and Nation Building in Everyday Post-Socialist Life*, Routledge, 2017. Also, the film "Goodbye Lenin", includes a characteristic case of this kind of "food memorabilia".

<sup>18</sup>The 'crisis' period for shuttle trading was between 1997 and 2004 when Russian authorities tightened their control over informal trade. Also, the ruble was devalued and trade flows between Turkey and Russia weakened considerably (Zabyelina, 2012).

This kind of businesses, in which Russian language constitutes a prerequisite, an "entry passport" in a way, reflects the structures of side-economies made by diasporic post-Soviet communities, including the FSU Greeks. It seems also to be the key factor for having the opportunity to work in these small-scale economies, often even more than being 'Pontic Greek'. This is also the case with Mouzenidis and Savvidis companies.

### **From small-scale economies to 'grand capital': Mouzenidis group of companies and the myth of Ivan Savvidis**

The two most notable businessmen of the post-Soviet Greek *return diaspora*<sup>19</sup> are Ivan Savvidis and Boris Mouzenidis. Both of them have considerable impact in social networks and diasporic politics, especially in Northern Greece and Thessaloniki. While the former has emerged not only as the most important economic agent of the diaspora, but also as a very influential politically figure in both national and diasporic levels<sup>20</sup>, the latter seems to be more rooted in the economy of the Pontic Greek diaspora of Northern Greece.

Very often we come across spectacular representations of the 'myth of origins', using the cliché of the 'hard-working' guy, 'clever', 'self-made man' who "started from nothing and reached the top". That is the way that the staff of Mouzenidis Group describe the "big boss", Boris Mouzenidis. N. T., who works as a driver for Mouzenidis Travel company, explained:

He came from Georgia to Greece carrying just a suitcase. He started to work in 'open' markets but soon he got into commercial activities. He went to Athens where he got into cargo and shipping business. Then he started thinking cleverly and predicted the flood of tourists coming from Russia in mid-90s, something that pushed him into the tourist business. From that point and on he has given jobs to thousands of people.

Mouzenidis represents the most prominent example of an entrepreneur who has maintained strong ties with the Greek post-Soviet diaspora in Thessaloniki and Khalkidhiki<sup>21</sup>. It's interesting that Mouzenidis seems to privilege the employment of members of the diasporic networks. The vast majority of short and long-term employees of Mouzenidis' companies come from the above-mentioned communities. Most of them constitute a low-skilled workforce, occupying positions that many times demand higher or more technical education. Even many who do business with him in Khalkidiki's local markets, like taxi drivers,

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<sup>19</sup> Concerning the use of 'return diaspora' see: Voutira (2001).

<sup>20</sup> The support of the Federation of Pontic Associations in Greece to Savvidis when the latter invaded, arm-bearing, inside the field of a football game during a match of the team he owns is significant: indicatively see <http://www.voria.gr/article/omospondia-pontion-ameristi-i-stirixi-mas-ston-ivan-savvidi>

<sup>21</sup> According to the census of the General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad in 1999-2000, there are 4,860 Greeks of the ex-USSR settled in various Khalkidiki regions. See: The identity of returnees emigrants from ex-Soviet Union, Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace, Thessaloniki, December 2000, p. 40.

builders and craftsmen, are people from the FSU. Far more important than the 'Soviet Greek' identity, kinship relations seem to be dominant in structuring Mouzenidi's Group companies. Many white-collar employees are chosen on that basis and it is not uncommon to see surnames that belong to the same genealogical tree in the high ranks of his group of companies. Devoted or not to the 'boss', members of the extended family are advantageously placed for employment.

Along with origin, identity and kinship relations, language seems to play also a role of equal importance in the staffing of Mouzenidi's Group of companies. It is not surprising that the knowledge of English language does not seem to be among the necessary criteria in order to be recruited; even some CEOs do not speak English. However, knowledge of Russian is *sine qua non*, since the main target of Mouzenidi's Group is the FSU market. In Mouzenidi's case, the existence of several companies that complete one another, constituting a vertically integrated Group (Christodoulou, 2013), reveals a different perception of business planning, not very common in Greek capitalism the last two or three decades.

While Mouzenidis Group constitutes a significant case of Pontic Greek capitalist activity, it also proves the importance of diasporic networks in the way business is conceived. Community is still the main source of employees, even if they often lack in needed skills. On the other hand, Ivan Savvidis's relations with the diaspora seem to be more symbolic than real in terms of employment in his firms. It has to be noted that Savvidis did not found any of his companies in Greece; instead, he bought already big, albeit in dire financial condition, existing firms like Makedonia Palace hotel in Thessaloniki, along with sports club like PAOK, newspapers like Ethnos and channels like Epsilon TV, as well as the port of the city. Even if his involvement with the main body of the diaspora is non-existent, he enjoys the respect of all the Pontic Greek associations which see him as *'τεμέτερον'* (one of us), a man of honour, the incarnation of the myths of the homeland, that suddenly disappeared after the arrival in Greece.<sup>22</sup> As a diasporic agent who acts in the transnational line between Russia and Greece, the power he draws (real or symbolic) from his involvement in Russian politics, reinforces his status and his position in relation to other powerful lobbies in Greece. Notably, as a President of the Federation of Greek Communities of Russia, he undoubtedly influences the relation of Pontic-Greek institutions and the Greek state<sup>23</sup>.

### **Diaspora, solidarity and entrepreneurship in changing times**

When Pontic Greeks came from the FSU they had to confront an extremely difficult situation having to adapt to a new social, cultural and economic environment, often being

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<sup>22</sup> Needless to say that the case of big entrepreneurs coming from the FSU countries is a subject that was merely touched here and further analysis needs to be done in the future.

<sup>23</sup> Following Koinova's approach on diaspora positionality (Koinova, 2012; 2018), Savvidis, as a diaspora political agent is amassing power from his sociospatial position in the context of diasporic Greek networks from the FSU and his role in Greek-Russian relations. However, the study of these linkages and networks needs further attention than this research allows.

discriminated against by native Greeks who doubted their belongingness. With time, they managed to secure a better socioeconomic position, but from the late 2000s they faced, together with native Greeks the severe economic crisis that hit Greece. However, according to our informants, the first settlement in Greece was incomparably harder than any economic crises that happened later, and the importance of the diasporic community in employment was significant. The decline of small firms and solidarity networks of the 90s marks the passage to more competitive frameworks within a capitalist economy in crisis, where new forms of exchange emerge.

As P.S. explained, in the past there were many small textile and craft companies owned by Greeks from the FSU which exclusively employed workers from the Pontic community. Not only because of solidarity with the members of the diaspora, but also on the basis of the moral premises of the community, Pontic Greeks were considered more “hard working” than native Greeks.

The economic crisis in Greece that affected mainly the small enterprises and provoked an explosion of unemployment had serious implications, not only in the diasporic economic networks, but also in the way Pontic Greeks conceived of their community. As Pontic Greeks have become more integrated and competition in the job market greater, employing compatriots is no longer a prerequisite today, and solidarity is filtered by many different factors and related to different issues. For N.T., work ethic and solidarity is, after all, an individual issue and not a collective characteristic of the diaspora. With the exception of Mouzenidi’s large-scale business which recruits mostly Pontic Greeks mainly because of their advantage of speaking Russian, today’s ‘solidarity’ is channelled through different forms, more symbolic, of exchange and sharing. Communities and lobbies of knowledge and culture emerge, accumulating social capital.

Our informant P.S. evokes the example of V. T., a historian who owns a small insurance company. His clients are almost exclusively Pontic Greeks, and as a return to the community he finances lectures on themes dedicated to the history of the Pontic Greek diaspora. He also finances cultural and musical events related to the Pontic tradition. In the case of V.T., thus, symbolic capital is his return towards the community that supports his business. Savvidis is a similar case: by financing different associations that support Pontic cultural tradition<sup>24</sup>, as well as charities that promote the relationship between Russia and Greece and the orthodox ecclesiastical heritage<sup>25</sup>, he participates in a form of social and symbolic capital registered in the name of global Pontic Greek diaspora. This capital aims at the politicisation of the "Pontic question" and the de-marginalisation of the Pontic communities through information and knowledge networks. In this framework, the different cultural associations are the mediators of exchange as Pontic Greek businessmen finance their activities.

But what can this transformation of practices and exchanges tell us about diasporic networks almost 30 years after the beginning of migration flows? On the one hand, the

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<sup>24</sup> The chair of the Pontic studies in Aristoteles University is a charity of the Ivan Savvidis Foundation: [http://www.savvidifond.ru/press\\_center/news/1859](http://www.savvidifond.ru/press_center/news/1859)

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.savvidifond.ru/programs/spiritual\\_rebirth/](http://www.savvidifond.ru/programs/spiritual_rebirth/)

emerging capitalist businesses in both national and transnational levels, alongside the decline of low-scale economic activities and solidarity networks of the 90s, implies a shift of economic exchanges to a different, more 'rationalised' economic framework. But at the same time, the diasporic community continues to serve as the main network of exchanges and of organisation of economic activities. Labour organisation in the Mouzenidis Group shows us how capitalist ethics co-exist with community-based principles, while symbolic exchanges, as a return for economic support, marks the persistence of diasporic networks in economic and social life. Therefore, one could surmise that though diasporas adapt to more capitalist economic frameworks in both development and crisis periods, economic (and symbolic) exchanges are still embedded in community relations. Capitalist ethics and rationalisation seem to co-exist with a "moral economy" of the Pontic diaspora where exchanges are still mediated by moral premises and values around the importance and the virtues of the community who seek to cope with integration in the host country. Even if the diasporic economy is indeed transformed and shaped by global economic transformation, this change is far from linear, embedding different and often contradictory characteristics.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we tried to show that Pontic Greek migrants from the FSU have survival and livelihood strategies heavily reliant on the diasporic and community networks that were formed rapidly after settlement. In the case of Thessaloniki, migrants chose to settle where family and relatives were already present and could help them establish themselves through solidarity and exchange practices to cope with migration. Their professional and economic activities took place within community networks of the diaspora that soon gave some opportunities of business activities through the trade of 'Russian products', for those who were able to accumulate 'migrant capital' and keep close relations with the country of origin. The gradual emergence of capitalist activities within the diaspora, and the global economic changes and crises, transformed the way members of the community exchange and work. However, these transformations didn't seem to disembed the economy of the diaspora from the social, symbolic and economic implications of belonging to a post-Soviet Greek community.

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# The Greek Diaspora Project at SEESOX

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## Mission statement

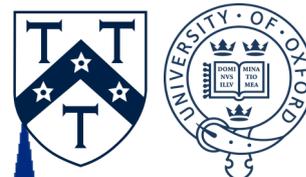
The Greek Diaspora Project (GDP) was set up at SEESOX with the overall aim to serve as a nexus between academic research and policy, and to help identify ideas to maximise the developmental impact of the Greek diaspora on contemporary Greek politics, economy and society. The project studies the relationship between Greece and its diaspora within the context of the current economic crisis and beyond.

## Project objectives

- Become the preeminent forum for debate between the wider diaspora scholarship and scholarship dedicated to the Greek diaspora;
- Relate Greece and its diaspora to other similar countries and conduct in-depth comparative studies;
- Be a port of call for anyone interested in contemporary aspects of the Greek diaspora, in terms of its library and archival resources, activities, institutional affiliations, policy relevant research;
- Analyse the new trends characterizing the current Greek diaspora in conjunction to the historical context, socio-economic change, varieties of cultural affinities;
- Assess the developmental impact of the diaspora on the Greek economy and identify policies that can maximize its contribution;
- Inform Greek public debate and Greek policy makers on the Greek diaspora, its evolution and the policy implications of actual and potential interactions between the diaspora and Greece;
- Secure funding and research opportunities for a young generation of scholars dedicated to the study of the Greek diaspora.

## About SEESOX

South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX) is part of the European Studies Centre (ESC) at St Antony's College, Oxford. It focuses on the interdisciplinary study of the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. Drawing on the academic excellence of the University and an international network of associates, it conducts academic and policy relevant research on the current multifaceted transformations of the region. It follows closely regional phenomena and analyses the historical and intellectual influences which have shaped perceptions and actions in the region. In Oxford's best tradition, the SEESOX team is committed to understanding the present through the *longue durée* and reflecting on the future through high quality scholarship.



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