Political Self-Understanding, Cultural Openness and Public Attitudes Towards Immigrants in Western Greece

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present research findings from a study of public attitudes towards immigrants in the region of Western Greece (the vast majority of them from Balkan countries). Positive and negative attitudes towards immigrants in the region are correlated with political self-understanding (across the left-right spectrum) and cultural openness as reflected in attitudes towards different languages and religions and towards intercultural communication between immigrants and locals. The findings suggest that the degree of cultural openness is indeed related to the orientation of general public attitudes towards immigrants and that political self-understanding across the left-right spectrum remains relevant for explaining these attitudes. The study nevertheless found that there is only limited willingness to develop close social relationships with Balkan immigrants and that the degree of such willingness is not significantly correlated either with cultural openness or with political self-understanding.

Keywords: Attitudes towards Balkan immigrants; political self-understanding; cultural openness.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to present research findings from a study of public attitudes towards immigrants in the region of Western Greece. Most of the immigrants in question have come from Balkan countries. Positive and negative general attitudes towards these immigrants, along with views on the

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possibility of close social relationships being developed with immigrants, are correlated with political self-understanding across the left-right spectrum and with cultural openness as reflected in attitudes towards different languages and religions and attitudes towards intercultural communication between immigrants and locals. General public attitudes towards a series of different nationalities are also measured and taken into account through deployment of an affinity scale.

Research methods

The findings presented in this paper are part of a broader research project (October 2005 to March 2006) involving investigation of social, economic and employment characteristics of foreign-born immigrants (the vast majority of them from the Balkan countries) in the region of Western Greece, and the attitudes of the local population towards them[2]. As far as the local population is concerned, the sample was chosen via random stratified sampling from among permanent residents of the region who have voting rights and are under 70 years of age.

A total of 12 strata were deployed in selecting the sample from the official voting records after some weeding out (double names, people over 70 and permanent inhabitants of other areas were excluded): 3 for the 3 prefectures of the region (Achaia, Aitoloakarnania and Ilia), 2 for gender and 2 for urban and rural places of residence. The sample size of each stratum was selected in accordance with the actual population size of the stratum. Potential respondents were approached in their homes for personal face-to-face interviews with the use of a semi-structured questionnaire to record their socioeconomic status and their views and attitudes towards immigrants. Likert-scale format was used for the vast majority of the questions put to the respondents. 438 questionnaires (73% of the planned total sample number)

were judged valid. The socioeconomic characteristics of respondents included political self-understanding (across a 1-10 scale, starting from 1 (right) to 10 (left)), age (6 age categories), educational status, occupation, income, and migration experience in the past (9 variables). A total of 39 variables are used in this paper on the personal attitudes towards immigrants (across "positive – negative" scales), cultural openness (with opinion questions across a "strongly agree – strongly disagree" scale) and 'affinity scales' (across a 1-10 affinity scale, 10 representing the least affinity and 1 the greatest).

Findings

Immigrants in Western Greece Region belong in two different categories: (i) immigrants coming to Greece as a staging point preparatory to a later move to Italy and Western Europe [these are mostly Asians resident in the downtown area of the international port of Patras]; (ii) immigrants coming to Greece to work. Scattered throughout the region, they are mostly from the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Political Self-Understanding

The question on political self-understanding was answered by 60% of the sample (261 respondents). Most put themselves in the centre (32.2%) and centre-left (30%) of the political spectrum. 24.5% of the respondents put themselves at the centre-right, 5.4% on the far left and 7.7% on the far right. The average score is 5.5, going from 1 (right) to 10 (left). The use of averages revealed differences deriving from a variety of sample characteristics such as: (a) age, with younger respondents placing themselves more towards the right than older ones (the 18-25 age class registers an average score of 7.11, falling to 5.73 in the next age class (26-35), steadily dropping to a figure of 4.78 for the oldest age class); (b) income, where respondents with higher incomes place themselves more towards the right than respondents with lower incomes (all income classes higher than €15,000 per year score higher than 6, while all lower income classes score

less than 5.4); occupation, where civil servants, businessmen/women place themselves more towards the right than workers (for those who have never worked the average figure is 7; for public servants 6.6 and for businessmen/women 6.1, dropping below 5 for housewives and skilled and unskilled workers).

National Affinity

Opinions on affinity were recorded for 23 different nationalities from different regions and continents. Of these, Albanians, Bulgarians and Romanians are, not surprisingly, graded more negatively than the others. Most negative of all are Albanians, with an average affinity value of 7 (with 10 representing the least affinity and 1 the greatest), followed by the Bulgarians with 5.33 and Romanians with 4.73. After this come Chinese and Kurds, with 4.62 and 4.56 respectively. The most liked nationalities are the Italians (2.63), the Finns (2.38) and the Swiss (2.37). In the following analysis only the affinity values of the numerically largest national groups (Albanians, Bulgarians and Romanians) are considered. The values correlate positively[3] (r = .537, s = .000, N = 347 for Albanians and Bulgarians; r = .421, s = .000, N = 350 for Albanians and Romanians; and r = .407, s = .000, N = 335 for Bulgarians and Romanians), indicating that the people who 'dislike' Albanians are those who also dislike the other nationalities. This finding shows that there is a widespread low affinity with immigrants originating from the Balkan countries as a whole. There is surprisingly no correlation between political self-understanding and affinity values for those three nationalities, revealing that different factors such as social relations or cultural openness may underlie measures for affinity. This will be further investigated in the following sections.

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[3] All correlation coefficients used are Spearman's r_{h0}.

Cultural Openness

Cultural openness in the region is assessed through questions on language and religious diversity and cultural contacts with other people (Henderson, 1994; Kuper, 1994; Downey, 2000). Concerning language diversity (the question was "I believe that language diversity is positive"), opinions are in general favourable, with 40.2% of respondents supporting the view that diversity is a positive development for the area they reside in and 29.5% that it is negative. It correlates very weakly but positively with political self-understanding ($r = .125$, $s = .031$, $N = 298$), as is also evident from the average values for each category of answer, which decrease from 6.09 in the "strongly disagree" category to 5.10 in the "agree" category, increasing again slightly to 5.44 in the "strongly agree" category. The values of the variable correlate positively with opinions on religious diversity ($r = .631$, $s = .000$, $N = 434$) and on cultural contacts opinions ($r = .573$, $s = .000$, $N = 431$). The trends are not similar to those for affinity values. For Romanians the values for the variable correlate only very weakly with affinity values ($r = -.204$, $s = .000$, $N = 372$). Moreover, the average affinity values for each category of answer reveal no consistent trend between the different "agree - disagree" categories.

As far as religious diversity is concerned, one variable is used: "I believe that religious diversity is positive". 40.6% of respondents express negative opinions and 31% positive. Political self-understanding correlates weakly with the values for the variable ($r = -.287$, $s = .000$, $N = 298$), with average political self-understanding values decreasing across the "disagree" - "agree" categories. It appears that opinions on religious diversity are in general more polarized than those on language diversity, a phenomenon apparently related to the strong sense of religious identity in Greece. For affinity values the trends are mixed. The values for the variable correlated only weakly with affinity values for Albanians ($r = -.149$, $s = .003$, $N = 389$). Consistent trends in average affinity

values are found only for Albanians, with values decreasing across the "disagree - agree" categories.

As far as cultural contacts are concerned, one variable is used: ("cultural contact with other people is positive"). Opinions are very positive, as 60.8% of the respondents endorse the view that cultural contact is positive and only 12.7% that it is negative. These opinions do not correlate with political self-understanding. They correlate very weakly with affinity values for Bulgarians and Romanians ($r = -.124$, $s = .019$, $N = 353$ for Bulgarians; and $r = -.143$, $s = .006$, $N = 372$ for Romanians). Consistent trends in the average affinity values are found only for Albanians, with values decreasing across the "disagree - agree" categories. It appears that these opinions are essentially much more general (cultural contact) and therefore easier to agree with and this is shown in the lack of correlations with the characteristics examined here.

Political self-understanding, cultural openness and general public attitudes towards immigrants

General views towards Balkan immigrants are positive for 49.2% of the sample and negative for 15.5%. There are no significant gender-based differences between these views. They correlate to some slight extent with all cultural openness variables ($r = -.350$, $s = .000$, $N = 434$ for languages diversity; $r = -.397$, $s = .000$, $N = 435$ for religious diversity; and $r = -.408$, $s = .000$, $N = 432$ for cultural contacts). Respondents with negative attitudes towards Balkan immigrants are not as culturally open as respondents who take a more positive view of Balkan immigrants. Political self-understanding also correlates very weakly with the general attitude towards Balkan immigrants ($r = .134$, $s = .021$, $N = 298$). No consistent trend is detectable in the average values for each category of answer (see Table 1). There are also no differences across the three prefectures. For affinity values a consistent trend emerges. Cultural openness variables weakly correlate with affinity values ($r = .272$, $s = .000$, $N = 390$ for Albanians; $r = .142$, $s = .007$, $N = 355$ for Bulgarians; and $r = .201$, $s = .000$, N

= 374 for Romanians). The average affinity values are moreover consistently lower for negative attitudes towards Balkan immigrants; reaching 8.17 for Albanians (see Table 1). As far as the region's three prefectures are concerned, significant differences are observed only for Albanians, with Aitoloakarnania respondents more negative and Ilia respondents more positive.

Table 1. Political self-understanding average values and affinity average values for the question "my general view of Balkan immigrants"

	% (N=437)	Mean value of political self-understanding (N)	Mean affinity values for Albanians (N)
I have no views	2.7	5.67 (9)	4.58 (12)
Positive	17.8	5.49 (35)	6.15 (66)
Rather positive	31.4	5.05 (91)	6.78 (121)
Neither positive nor negative	32.5	5.84 (82)	7.42 (128)
Rather negative	11.4	5.48 (31)	7.93 (45)
Negative	4.1	6.58 (12)	8.17 (18)
Total	100	5.50 (260)	7.01 (390)
	% (N=437)	Mean affinity values for Bulgarians (N)	Mean affinity values for Romanians (N)
I have no views	2.7	4.00 (11)	2.70 (9)
Positive	17.8	4.53 (59)	3.97 (59)
Rather positive	31.4	5.40 (114)	4.34 (105)
Neither positive nor negative	32.5	5.62 (116)	5.26 (104)
Rather negative	11.4	5.78 (40)	5.63 (35)
Negative	4.1	5.80 (15)	5.27 (13)
Total	100	5.34 (355)	4.72 (319)

Political self-understanding, cultural openness and the possibility of close social relationships with Balkan immigrants

Five variables were used in assessment of relationships with Balkan immigrants: "would you develop relationships with immigrants": neighbourhood relationships, workplace relationships, school relationships, marital relationships, friendly relationships. Results are generally mixed, most

respondents saying that "under certain circumstances" they would develop such relationships, except marital ones, where opinions are negative ("under no circumstances"). These variables in general correlate very weakly with cultural openness variables (the highest correlation coefficient value is -171 for 'language diversity' and 'friendly relationships with immigrants'). Political self-understanding does not have much effect on these. Where there is a correlation it is very weak (r = .153, s = .014, N = 260 for relationships in the workplace). Moreover no consistent trend is detectable in average values for each category of answer.

Table 2. Mean values for national affinity and relationships with Balkan immigrants

"Would you develop relationships with immigrants"	"In the workplace"		
	Albanians (N)	Bulgarians (N)	Romanians (N)
I have no views	5.09 (34)	4.07 (27)	3.24 (25)
Close relationships	5.56 (66)	4.38 (63)	3.46 (61)
Maybe, under certain circumstances	7.51 (194)	5.71 (189)	4.98 (187)
Under no circumstances	8.3 (47)	5.51 (39)	5.63 (46)
Total	**7.00 (341)**	**5.29 (318)**	**4.65 (319)**
"Would you develop relationships with immigrants"	"Marital relationships"		
	Albanians (N)	Bulgarians (N)	Romanians (N)
I have no views	5.09 (34)	4.07 (27)	2.24 (17)
Close relationships	4.32 (37)	3.65 (37)	2.58 (33)
Maybe, under certain circumstances	6.71 (111)	5.01 (104)	4.36 (95)
Under no circumstances	8.22 (155)	6.08 (148)	5.45 (142)
Total	**6.98 (337)**	**5.27 (316)**	**4.57 (287)**
"Would you develop relationships with immigrants"	"Friendly relationships"		
	Albanians (N)	Bulgarians (N)	Romanians (N)
I have no views	5.09 (34)	4.07 (27)	3.24 (25)
Close relationships	5.05 (63)	3.95 (64)	3.67 (61)
Maybe, under certain circumstances	7.51 (167)	5.65 (161)	4.75 (162)
Under no circumstances	8.3 (77)	6.15 (67)	5.9 (70)
Total	**6.99 (341)**	**5.28 (319)**	**4.68 (318)**

For affinity values a consistent trend does emerge. There is a weak positive correlation between the social relationship variables and affinity variables for Albanians (r = .391, s = .000, N = 341 for workplace relationships; r = .505, s = .000, N = 337 for marital relationships; and r = .448, s = .000, N = 341 for friendly relationships); Bulgarians (r = .201, s = .000, N = 318 for workplace relationships; r = .304, s = .000, N = 316 for marital relationships; and r = .275, s = .000, N = 319 for

friendly relationships) and Romanians (r = .275, s = .000, N = 319 for workplace relationships; r = .227, s = .000, N = 319 for marital relationships; and r = .291, s = .000, N = 318 for friendly relationships). The average affinity values are moreover consistently lower for the "maybe" and "under no circumstances" categories. For Albanians they reach values higher than 8 (see Table 2). Negative affinity values for Balkan immigrants and above all for Albanians may be linked to trends towards *securitization* of the migration process at the European and global level and the related *media coverage of the immigrant presence* as a possible 'threat' for society in fields such as public security, order and health (Huysmans 2000; Walter 2002; Ibrahim 2005).

Conclusions

Superficial and shallow attitudes to cultural openness appear to prevail in Western Greece. This may be seen in the first instance from the percentage rejection of linguistic diversity (29.5% of the sample) and religious diversity (40.6% of the sample) in the area. There is a positive correlation between cultural openness, general levels of public awareness in relation to Balkan immigrants and political self-understanding. Respondents who place themselves on the left side of the political spectrum are in general more open to cultural diversity). By contrast, when there is examination of the possibility of developing close social relationships with immigrants, the role of cultural openness is not as significant as might be expected. Only 18.8% of respondents said unconditionally that they were inclined to develop close and friendly relationships with immigrants. Only 20.6% would develop close neighborhood relationships. Only 11.1% would marry an immigrant. Only 11.7% would develop social relationships with immigrants within trade unions and only 15.2% would develop relationships with immigrants within the education system. There is nevertheless only very weak and barely statistically significant correlation between the cultural openness of those who would develop close social relations with immigrants and those who would not. The

same applies for political self-understanding. Political self-understanding correlates only with general public attitudes toward immigrants and not with views on the potential for developing close social relations in important social domains such as education, work and the neighborhood. The above findings reveal a tendency towards social entrenchment of immigrants from Balkan countries (most of all immigrants from Albania, but to a great extent immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania as well) and thus, the high mean affinity value for Albanians (7, the value of 10 represents highest degree of antipathy), for Bulgarians (5.3) and for Romanians (4.7) are explained. In general, affinity values correlate with the variables on social relations for the three abovementioned nationalities.

Two important findings emerge from this study:
-    The first has to do with the correlation between cultural openness and political self-understanding. General views concerning cultural diversity are influenced by the degree of affiliation with different political cultures.
-    The second pertains to the correlation between nationality affinity and the variables to do with social relations with immigrants. There is only a weak link between cultural openness and the willingness to develop close relations. This suggests certain shallowness in the support expressed for cultural diversity and also points to the possible existence of other crucial factors that might explain the negative attitudes towards Balkan immigrants, especially Albanians.

Empirical evidence presented in this paper may contribute to the ongoing debate on comprehensive social inclusion of immigrants, with special emphasis on the quality and depth of social relations between immigrants and natives. Nevertheless, further investigation is needed of the role of government and the media in linking migration and immigrants to security issues and in this way possibly contributing to the formation of negative attitudes.

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