

NEW DIASPORA: OUR OWN PART OF THE STORY

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Amidst an unprecedented refugee crisis that dominates international headlines, sparks public demonstrations of both solidarity and discrimination, and even shakes the foundations of the European project, a more quiet and far less tragic migration flow continues to grow. Media and scholars often refer to it as ‘the Greek brain drain’, even though it has already become something much broader than that.

What started as an increasing number of educated and multilingual young Greek professionals leaving their country has evolved into a massive wave of ‘neomigrants’ with diverse backgrounds and skills. Everyone seems to associate this wave with the ongoing economic crisis, but its causes are more complicated than just a combination of high unemployment and low salaries. Surveys have shown that many Greeks move abroad believing there is no future in their country; not just for themselves, but for everyone else too. This is a moral, cultural and deeply political crisis. In a sense, it can be also seen as an existential one.

Officially, the new Greek diaspora is not even recognised as a ‘proper’ migration phenomenon, since it is mainly confined within the boundaries of the EU, which allows the unobstructed mobility of workforce originating in any of its member states.

There is no reliable estimate regarding the exact number of Greek people who have abandoned their country over the last 5-6 years. Adding up figures from different sources, I think it is safe to estimate that at least 350-400,000 Greeks have moved abroad since 2009, with a high probability of their number reaching or surpassing the 500,000 mark by the end of 2015. In a country of 11 million, this figure corresponds to over 10% of its economically active population. When it comes to university graduates in the 20-35 age group, I don’t even dare to try and calculate a percentage.

Having personally experienced the excitement and frustration of the expat adventure during a time of crisis, at some point I realised this is a historical phenomenon that needs to be

recorded. Being a documentary filmmaker, I started filming stories of Greeks who had recently moved to the Netherlands, where I also used to live until only a few months ago. In March 2013, together with an international team of friends and volunteers, we launched the New Diaspora project; an online platform aiming at hosting mini documentaries and all kinds of user generated content that revolve around the multiple aspects of this issue.

Instead of adopting the traditional content provider-consumer model, we chose to formulate a digital storytelling community, where Greek 'neomigrants' from all over the world could submit their own 'open letters', photos and videos. Our initiative received Greek and international media attention, our social media reach grew, and our partnerships flourished. We are now on the verge of securing the necessary grants and sponsorships that will enable New Diaspora to step up and become a global participatory media entity, that not only produces and hosts a variety of niche content, but also functions as a reference point for expatriate Greeks to network with each other, organise offline events and collectively pursue common goals. Such as the right to vote from abroad in the Greek parliamentary elections, a constitutional right that awaits to be implemented for decades.

There is a number of reasons why I think the New Diaspora initiative is so important:

- It continues to be relevant, since thousands of Greeks keep moving abroad every year, with few of them deciding to return home anytime soon.
- Many of those people represent the most dynamic and skilled part of Greece's human resources; without their experience and talent, the prospect of rebooting the Greek economy becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible.
- Whether they are given incentives to relocate to Greece or not, the Greek expats' entrepreneurial activities can provide know-how, inspiration and even jobs in their homeland.
- Redefining an obsolete collective identity (that somehow seems to be stuck in the 'Zorba' cliché of the 60's) is absolutely necessary in the attempt to rebrand Greece, and it can not be done solely by the ones who are left behind.
- In an age where internet gives almost everyone a chance to communicate and network with others on a global scale, half a million people deserve to have a platform of their own, so that their voice can be heard.
- Even though the Greek and international press occasionally publishes stories on the Greek 'brain drain', there is no other effort to record a migration wave in real time, apart from New Diaspora.

Over the last few years, we have seen some really ugly developments taking place in Greece: steep rise in unemployment and drop of GDP turning a recession into full-scale depression, loss of state sovereignty and devaluation of the democratic principles that once set the foundations of a United Europe, neonazi thugs entering the Greek Parliament and a political and social instability that is far from over yet.

I like to believe that the new Greek diaspora can eventually play the role of the 'cavalry', saving the day when everything else has failed to bring a much desired change. Storytelling lies at the core of this united effort, and we would be foolish not to use it as a tool that will empower not only a 'borderless nation' of Greeks living abroad, but also the lives and dreams of the ones who stayed behind.