Homeland-Diaspora relations in flux: Greece and Greeks abroad at times of crisis

June 22-23, 2018

Conference proceedings

On June 22-23, 2018, the Greek Diaspora Project at SEESOX organized the conference "Homeland-Diaspora relations in flux: Greece and Greeks abroad at times of crisis", at St Antony's College. The conference explored the impact of Greek diaspora communities on their homeland through interactions in the domains of economy, politics and philanthropy.

During the first panel, the SEESOX team presented some of the output of in-house research. Othon Anastasakis (SEESOX) and Foteini Kalantzi (SEESOX) examined the substance of Greek parliamentary debates on diaspora during the period 2009-2017, by focusing on issues such as the diaspora vote, Greek state sponsored language education, and diaspora aid and investment. Irina Laphsyna (SEESOX) looked at the Greek diaspora from a conceptual and comparative perspective and compared the Greek with the Ukrainian Diaspora and the role of the state in mobilizing diasporas in times of conflict. Antonis Kamaras presented research on diaspora philanthropy and governance in the Greek state and non-profit sectors. Renee Hirschon presented some preliminary findings from an anthropological study on the Greeks in Oxford.

The second session dealt with diasporic identities. Giorgos Anagnostou (Ohio State University) pointed out the existence of two Greek-American narratives, the bootstrap narrative whereby individual achievements bear no connection to collective endeavor and the narrative relating to the Greek-American’s community aligning with other actors to help achieve goals of collective significance. Anastasia Christou (Middlesex University) addressed more recent migration resulting from the socio-economic crisis. Vassiliki Chrysanthropoulou (University of Athens) focused on the subnational level, exploring relationships between Greek islanders residing in Australia and their communities of origin.

The third session dealt with diasporic institutions. Marina Frangos (University of the Aegean) put forward a critical review of the Council of the World Hellenes’ (SAE), arguing that this consultative body was neither deeply rooted in the diaspora nor propelled by its own power of initiative. Antonis Kamaras (SEESOX) examined the role of diaspora in private and public education in Greece, arguing that conflicting dynamics in both of these spheres made philanthropy and volunteerism a highly contested process. Ioanna Mousikoudis (University of Aix-Marseille) gave an account of Greek language schooling in the city of Marseilles and focused on the quality and effectiveness of the Greek state’s provision of teachers and Greek instruction.
The fourth session focused on Diaspora and Church. Ioannis Grigoriadis (Bilkent University) discussed the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, including how the Greek economic crisis had affected its role as a diaspora actor and its evolving relationship both with the Moscow Patriarchate and with the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in North America. Athanasios Grammenos (University of Macedonia) analysed Archbishop Iakovos’ strategy to make Greek Orthodoxy into a central religious denomination in the US, through his historical engagement with the fight for civil rights and his efforts to have Greek Orthodoxy and Greek-America mutually reinforce each other with a strong Greek-American community cohering around an invigorated Archdiocese. Alexander Kitroeff (Haverford College) mentioned some key statistics - 87% of Greek Americans born in the US, 80% plus observant in the Greek Orthodox Church - to explain how the Patriarchate had become the leading priority for US politicians with Greek-American constituents. For the impoverished immigrants in the US the church was the organization which provided the educational and social nucleus of their communities. Georgios Trantas (University of Erfurt) wondered whether the new influx of highly educated immigrants from Greece to Europe might not create a fusion between a progressive laity and the Greek Orthodox churches of the continent which might yet act as an agent of modernisation in Greece.

The fifth session on media and diaspora included George Topalidis (University of Florida) who offered a historical study scrutinizing the distinctive treatment between ex-Ottoman and mainland diaspora Greeks in the US Greek diaspora print media. The session concluded with Nikos Stampoulopoulos’ analysis of Greece’s new diaspora, and the premiere of his documentary on the travails of a modern day young Greek emigre in the Netherlands and her engagement with the new society abroad.

The sixth session focused on diaspora and economy. This included Dimitris Kataiftsis (University Paris IV – Sorbonne) and Anastasios Grigorakis (University of Macedonia) who traced the trajectory of entrepreneurship of the Pontic Greeks who repatriated to Greece from the Former Soviet Union, in so doing transitioning from liquidating family possessions in flea markets to engaging in sophisticated cross-border business operations, either in managing tourist flows from the FSU to Greece or acquiring important assets put on sale by the Greek government. Americ Faure (London School of Economics) and Socratis Koniordos (University of Crete) analysed in their presentations the remittance patterns of the new Greek migration. They both noted that middle class, highly educated Greeks were not prone to remit. Americ argued that these declining remittances were partly due to the lack of trust towards the Greek state. Socratis underlined that migration had as a motivation, by and large, the reproduction of middle class life standards abroad. Finally, Platon Tinios (Piraeus University) underlined that the two main assets of an individual were his home and his pension, both being affected by migration. An additional factor discussed was the ability of the Greek state to negotiate, on behalf of its diaspora, optimal arrangements for pensionable obligation payouts with host states.

The seventh session dealt with brain drain. It included Vasiliki Toumanidou (University of Leeds) who analysed student migration to the UK, Anthi Koskina (College IdEF / Universite
Paris XIII) who reviewed the policy initiatives which the Greek state took to mitigate the brain drain effects of the crisis and Eleni Tseligka (Staffordshire University) who explored the responses of the Greek communities of Germany to the recent inflows of Greek migrants. They were sometimes overwhelmed, as many low skilled migrants led a precarious existence. She underlined that many of these migrants were employed in the black economy and thus their employment patterns and numbers were underreported.

The eighth session on diaspora engagement started with Elizabeth Mavroudi (Loughborough University) who noted that the crisis-generated engagement of Greek-Australians with the homeland could either be inclusive or exclusive, depending on differentiated ability among the diaspora. Additionally, any type of engagement would need to overcome Greek-Australian mistrust towards the Greek state, the integrity of Greek institutions and the perceived attitudes of the Greek people. Antonis Piperoglou (Australian Catholic University) explored the tendency of prominent Greek-Australian professionals and businessmen to share in the Asia-centric perspective of the mainstream Australian business community. He argued that Greek policy makers should alert Greek business actors to the exposure and expertise of their Greek-Australian counterparts in the Asian continent. Olimpia Dragoumi (Humboldt – Universität zu Berlin) reviewed the status of the Greek community in Poland while Anastasia Kafe (SEESOX) discussed methodologies employed in surveying Greek diaspora communities in the UK, which is part of SEESOX’s research.

The last panel was composed of the founders of a number of bottom-up diaspora initiatives who presented their experiences and lessons learned from engaging with diaspora matters from a practitioner’s perspective. These included Nikos Theodorakis’ BrainGain, Effie Kyrtata’s Reload Greece, Nikos Stampoulopoulos’ New Diaspora and Dimitris Kraniotis’ Hellenic Institute of Cultural Diplomacy.

In conclusion, the conference provided numerous insights into the state of Greek diaspora-homeland relations, gave the participants the opportunity to acquaint themselves with different perspectives and current research and critically advanced SEESOX’s aim of sharing its research agenda with Greek diaspora scholars from some of the most important Greek diaspora communities. It also created a strong network for cooperation and synergies in the future!