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Italy and Greece: Legalizations

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Many southern European nations have had legalization programs that granted some unauthorized foreigners temporary legal work and residence rights. The general result seems to be that legalization helps individual foreigners, but only temporarily reduces rising stocks of illegal immigrants.

Southern European amnesties did not generally follow ILO guidelines, which stress that: (1) to qualify, the foreigners should have had only a short period of unauthorized residence; (2) employment should not be a condition of amnesty—requiring a job promotes fraud; (3) employers of unauthorized workers should not be prosecuted, so that they help their unauthorized workers apply for amnesty; and (4) foreigners should be made aware of legalization programs through churches, ethnic organizations, and employers and unions, and they should be assured that their application information will be kept confidential.

Italy. Italy set an immigration quota of 63,000 for 2000, including half for foreigners already in Italy and 6,000 for new entrants from Albania, and 3,000 each for Tunisia and Morocco. In 1999, Italy announced that it would grant work permits to some illegal foreign workers, and gave 123,000 permits to 250,000 applicants as of December 1999.

Italy had 1.2 million legal foreign residents in 1997; 782,000 were in the labor force. In addition, there are believed to be at least 250,000 illegally present, most from Morocco, Albania, Tunisia, Romania and Poland.

Italy has had more legalizations than any other country, four— in 1986, 1990, 1997 and 1998, and received a total of 850,000 applications, including 235,000 in 1990; 259,000 in 1997; and 250,000 in 1998. Legalization in Italy allows foreigners to obtain a temporary legal status. To qualify for the 1998 legalization, they had to be in Italy before March 20, 1998 and prove that they had employment. The 1998 amnesty was expanded and extended in 1999.

Those legalized foreigners who cannot find jobs on which employers pay employment-related taxes generally revert to illegal status. There are two legal statuses and two employment statuses that apply to four types of foreigners. The legal statuses are legal and illegal, and the employment statuses are registered and unregistered. Registration means that legal and illegal workers are employed in jobs on which payroll taxes are paid; in some cases, workers pay the employer's taxes so that they can be registered as employed. Italian law requires foreigners to hold regular or registered jobs to maintain their legal status; the permits given out during legalizations must be renewed every two years.

For example, some 235,000 illegal foreigners registered for the first legalization in 1990; there were another 138,000 unregistered foreigners and an estimated 341,000 illegal foreigners, for a total of 690,000. In 1996, 391,000 illegal foreigners were registered, 166,000 unregistered foreigners and an estimated 182,000 illegal foreigners, for a total of 739,000. In 1998, there were 564,000 illegal foreigners registered and another 260,000 unregistered foreigners and an estimated 100,000 illegal foreigners, for a total 924,000. About 130,000 Moroccans are legally present in Italy, including 23,000 who were given immigrant status in 1999.

The council of Italian bishops in January 2000 announced plans to reduce the number of marriages between Muslims and Christians because they are not "ideal" given the different values and traditions of the two religions. Instead of giving dispensations to permit marriages, the bishops said that: "The Church has a duty to evangelize Muslims, even though the difficulty of getting them to convert is known."

Pope John Paul II in January 2000 said that those belonging to non-Christian religions had less chance of salvation than adherents of the Church. "Religious relativism," he said, "leads to the opinion that one religion is as good as another."

Boat People. Italian coast guards intercepted a Syrian ship carrying 300 illegal Kurdish immigrants off the southern Italian coast in late December 1999; an estimated 170 foreigners drowned off the Italian coast in 1999 trying to be

smuggled into the country. At the same time, several foreigners in a migrant detention center in Trapani, Sicily were killed in an arson attack.

Italy houses some migrants who arrive on boats in reception centers, some of which are jails. Under Italian law, detained migrants must be released or deported after 30 days. In 1999, 44 percent of the 8,000 migrants detained were deported.

Interior Minister Enzo Bianco in January 2000 said that "We must not allow our country to become a sieve. At the same time we must make sure that processing centers treat those awaiting deportation with dignity and ensure their safety."

Greece. Greece has a labor force of 4.3 million, plus an estimated 500,000 unauthorized foreigners employed at some time during a typical year. The Greek economy expanded by 3.5 percent in 1999, and is projected to grow by almost four percent in 2000.

Greece offered temporary legal status to persons in Greece since November 1997 or earlier. The registration period ended in May 1998, 373,000 foreigners from 120 countries applied, including 240,000 or 65 percent Albanians; 25,000 or seven percent Bulgarians; and 17,000 or five percent Romanians. This was an easy legalization, in the sense that the foreigner had to be in Greece for only one month and no proof of employment or residence was required.

However, to get a one- to three-year work and residence permit that Greeks call a "green card," foreigners have to show that they have employment and that payroll taxes are paid on their wages. Only 60 percent of the first-round applicants, some 220,000 people, applied for a green card. Many Greek employers and migrants seem to prefer remaining outside the formal labor market and bilateral guest-worker programs. Day-labor markets allow migrants to congregate, and farmers, construction contractors, hotels and restaurants and other businesses to find workers for short-duration jobs. Greece has had a bilateral guest-worker program with Albania since 1997, but only one Greek employer applied for an Albanian worker between 1997 and 1999.

Greece has an unusually high percentage of self-employed workers, 45 percent, which helps to explain why Greece has such a large underground economy— 30 to 35 percent of GDP (the US in 1998 had 10 million self-employed workers; they were eight percent of total employment).

Agriculture is the main employer of foreign workers in Greece with about 19 percent of the workforce. About 96 percent are self-employed farmers and their family members. Many farms are small and hire migrants for short-season harvesting and other tasks that the family cannot handle alone; the Greek Ministry of Agriculture says that Greek farmers need easy access to seasonal foreign workers to survive. Daily wages are 4,000 to 5,000 drachmas, or about \$16-\$19.

In December 1999, Greece reported that 4,240 foreigners requested asylum in Greece between January 1, 1998 and October 31, 1999 -- 293 were recognized as refugees. Greece spends 300 million drachmas a year on its refugee center at the port town of Lavrio, including spending on health care and education.

William Schomberg, "Southern Spanish town calm after race riots," Reuters, February 8, 2000. Pascal Reynard, "Southern Spanish immigrants live on scraps of "plastic miracle," Agence France Presse, February 9, 2000. "Italy govt fixes new immigration quota for 2000," Reuters, February 8, 2000. "Spanish Police Try to End Anti-Immigrant Clashes," Reuters, February 7, 2000.

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