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TOURISM CHALLENGES IN NORTHERN AEGEAN ISLANDS

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Key points

Northern Aegean islands have always played a crucial role contributing to the tourism industry of Greece but owing to the refugee crisis which began in 2015 tourism has been reduced around 80% in these islands. The reduction of tourism has negatively affected the Northern Aegean Islands. For the tourism to develop again the interdependent problems associated to the refugees need to be solved first. The Ministry of Tourism in cooperation with the European Union and the related involved ministries should take action to solve these problems. This policy briefs suggests three possible solutions:

- Upgrade the islands' infrastructure.
- Creation of a special agency for refugees to find work as long as they stay in the islands.
- Several concessions, including the preservation of a reduced Value Added Tax.

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the most important factors of Greek economy and as we know tourism grows especially in the islands. But the Northern Aegean Islands (Lesvos, Chios and Samos) are facing a lot of serious problems because of the refugee crisis which results in the reduction of their tourism. People living there are worried that they will be unemployed because tourists are afraid to choose these islands for their vacation. The problem begins from the insufficient way that Greece and the European Union is dealing with the influx of refugees in the Northern Aegean islands.



Evidence and Analysis

From 2015 Greece is experiencing an unprecedented influx of people fleeing war and deprivation in their countries in the Middle East and south Asia. More than 1 million refugees and migrants arrived in Greece in 2015 and early 2016 (as it is stated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees-UNHCR) and in 2016 with the closure of the “Balkan migration route”, tens of thousands of refugees were left stranded in the country. Most of the refugees and immigrants reached Greece by the Northern Aegean Islands- Lesbos, Chios and Samos. In 2015 the sea arrivals were more than 856.723, in 2016 173.450, in 2017 29.718 in 2018 32.497(UNHCR data). More than 16.100 refugees and migrants are staying in the Greek islands in 2018. Refugees are still coming and the Northern Aegean Islands need to be ready to help them but also to deal with the problems that local residents face because of this refugee crisis.

As it is stated by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights the local communities face the most challenges by the major inflows of asylum seekers. Lesbos and the rest Northern Aegean islands have been negatively affected due to the collapse of tourism (80 % reduction of tourism). The income of the people who worked in the tourism industry has been lowered and some people have even lost their jobs. Moreover the international reputation of these islands has been tarnished and they are no longer considered peaceful tourist resorts, like the rest of the Greek islands. This was strengthened by the international media showing pictures of the refugees coming to the islands with boats and showing some of them drowning. Who would want to visit these islands? This needs to be changed, these islands need to re-acquire their international reputation and they can use this crisis to their advantage. Greece has the opportunity to show the world that it is a capable country to respect and help the refugees sufficiently as well as being a safe place for relaxing summer vacations.

How can this be accomplished?

Certain measures need to be taken for the Northern Aegean islands to regain their place in the tourist industry. But these measures should be in accordance to the needs of the locals and the refugees. First of all, the infrastructure of the islands needs to be upgraded. Nowadays the public buildings, the transport infrastructure, the natural resources of the islands not only have to serve the local residents but the thousands refugees. So they have to be better organized and sufficient to accommodate all the people living in the islands, refugees and local residents. Especially the hospitals have to be fully staffed and the places in which the refugees are living need to be adequate to support their accommodation needs. More doctors, nurses, teachers, cleaners need to be sent to these islands as well as workers, engineers etc for the needs of the infrastructure upgrade. These basic organizational structures and facilities (buildings, roads, and power supplies) are needed



for the smooth operation of the societies and the enterprises of the islands. So improving the infrastructure will also result in the fight against unemployment because new jobs would be created.

Most of the refugees stay in these islands for a long time whether they want it or not. It would help them and also the local communities to deploy these people to some jobs. This would have many positive results, first it will help the economies of the islands and then it would boost the confidence of the refugees so gradually it will result in the cooperation between local residents and refugees. Refugees would not be seen as enemies anymore but they would be a part of helping the local communities and themselves.

Let's see how this can happen. In cooperation with the European Union a new agency will be created to find in which jobs refugees can be helpful (agriculture industry, fisheries, tourism, health) and then to deploy them in jobs they had previous experience. Northern Aegean Islands can add the refugees to their workforce and boost their economies. Moreover refugees will live under better conditions because they will have a job. Also this agency would also help the refugees who want to work by creating special programs for teaching the Greek language to them.

A few concessions would also play a crucial role to boost the tourism in the Northern Aegean islands. The most important is retaining the reduced Value Added Tax (VAT) in the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos so the prices of the goods and services can remain low and so they can be competitive. But not only the preservation of a reduced VAT is enough for the prices to remain lower but a monthly audit by governmental agencies would make sure that enterprises would not increase the prices. Furthermore coastal or by air interconnection of these islands should be easier and cheaper so tourists to have a motive to choose to visit them.

It is important to point out that EU emergency support funding contracted to humanitarian aid partners was €643.3 million since 2016 and over €200 million in 2018 (European Commission-facts and figures). So now the Greek state should get a bigger share from the emergency support funding and use it for the above stated suggestions to help the Northern Aegean Islands' refugees and residents. As well as the money for the suggestions can also come from the "Northern Aegean OP", this programme aims to boost economic development and create job opportunities in the islands of the North Aegean(Financial information-total OP budget: 310,059,290.00 €, total EU contribution: 248,047,430.00 €).

Conclusion

The Northern Aegean islands are facing many problems because of the refugee crisis with the reduction of tourism being the most disturbing consequence. As we can see this is a problem that can't be solved with temporary measures but with real changes which would



need time, effort and money (this would come from the emergency support funding from and the “Northern Aegean OP”). Improving the infrastructure, creating the agency for giving work to the refugees would add value and numbers to the manpower of the islands and providing concessions will contribute to the conditions for the tourism development. Gradually the reputation of these islands as beautiful and peaceful tourist destinations would be restored. Lesvos, Chios, Samos will not be presented as places facing problems but as places which dealt with one of the biggest refugee crisis and emerged stronger from this, tourism will thrive once again.



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