



## Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality & Diversity

Intercultural Mediation, Interpreting and Consultation Services in Decentralised Administration

Immigration Office Athens A (IO A)

January 2014 - now

On 1st January 2014, the One Stop Shop was launched and all the services issuing and renewing residence permits for immigrants in Greece were moved from the municipalities to Decentralised Administrations. Namely, the 66 Attica municipalities were shared between 4 Immigration Offices of the Attic Decentralised Administration.

**a) Immigration Office for Athens A with territorial jurisdiction over residents of the Municipality of Athens,**

**Address: Salaminias 2 & Petrou Ralli, Athens 118 55**

**b) Immigration Office for Central Athens and West Attica, with territorial jurisdiction over residents of the following Municipalities; i) Central Athens: Filadelfeia-Chalkidona, Galatsi, Zografou, Kaisariani, Vyronas, Ilioupoli, Dafni-Ymittos, ii) West Athens: Aigaleo Peristeri, Petroupoli, Chaidari, Agia Varvara, Ilion, Agioi Anargyroi-Kamatero, and iii) West Attica: Aspropyrgos, Eleusis (Eleusis-Magoula) Mandra-Eidyllia (Mandra - Vilia - Oinoi - Erythres), Megara (Megara-Nea Peramos), Fyli (Ano Liosia - Fyli - Zefyri).**

**Address: Salaminias 2 & Petrou Ralli, Athens 118 55**

**c) Immigration Office for North Athens and East Attica with territorial jurisdiction over residents of the following Municipalities; i) North Athens: Penteli, Kifisia-Nea Erythraia, Metamorfosi, Lykovrysi-Pefki, Amarousio, Fiothei-Psychiko, Papagou-Cholargos, Irakleio, Nea Ionia, Vrilissia, Agia Paraskevi, Chalandri, and ii) East Attica: Oropos, Marathonas, Rafina-Pikermi, Dionysos, Akharnes, Pallini, Paiania, Spata-**

Artemida, Kropia, Markopoulo Mesogaias, Lavreotiki, Saronikos, Vari-Voula-Vouliagmeni.

Address: Psarron 19, Pallini, 15351

d) Immigration Office for South Athens, Piraeus and Islands with territorial jurisdiction over residents of the following Municipalities; i) South Athens: Glyfada, Ellinko-Argyroupoli, Alimos, Nea Smyrni, Moschato-Tavros, Kallithea, Palaio Faliro, Agios Dimitrios, and ii) Piraeus & the Islands: Piraeus, Keratsini - Drapetsona, Nikaia - Rentis, Korydallos, Perama, Salamina, Aigina - Agistri, Troizina - Methana, Poros, Hydra, Spetsi.

Address: Agiou Dionisiou 5, Piraeus, 185 45

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**This report concerns the presence and services of Generation 2.0 RED in the IO A from January 2014 up to now.**

The Athens A Immigration Office (IO A) serves around 60,000 foreigners and is situated at Petrou Ralli and Salaminias 2. Each day 500 to 600 people crowd in through the Service's entrance although the daily limit of those who can be served is around 170 people.

From the launch of the One Stop Shop, a host of problems were observed which concerned the logistical infrastructure in the public service area as well as the shortages in manpower. Namely, the chronic deficiencies in the system became apparent, in areas such as interpreting and cultural mediation. At the same time, the necessary transfers of staff were not happening in time, resulting in delays and ineffectiveness in the service due to understaffing.

More specifically, from January 2014, the following was observed concerning the logistical infrastructure in the Athens A Immigration Office:

- *Lack of space provided for the foreigners.* People crowded into the Service's outside courtyard space, which was not suitably made. Namely, there was no shelter (from the rain in the winter and the sun in the summer), chairs, heating (for the winter), access to toilets, access to water. The lack of the above made waiting for the service especially difficult and dangerous for certain categories of people such as the elderly, pregnant women, young children and people with disabilities.
- *Insufficient interior planning of the service in order to serve the public.* The service's interior space was not suitably designed in order to serve the public and to accommodate the necessary number of staff and the public. The space was not suitably planned out and there were no signs to direct people to where they should go in order to:
  - A. to get information related to the course of action concerning their file, supporting documents or generally about the procedure,
  - B. to submit their papers in order to have their residence permit issued or renewed,
  - C. to collect residence permits (sticker)
- Insufficient information concerning the new procedure as well as about the supporting documents required in order to be issued and to renew residence permits. Namely:
  - lack of any information in languages other than Greek. All the supporting documents, including the information page on the Ministry's website, are only in Greek. Furthermore, the language used is such that it is difficult to understand for people whose mother tongue is not Greek.
  - All announcements inside the service concerning the public are displayed only in Greek (information about public holidays, deadlines, administrative fees etc.)

The following was observed regarding the workforce:

- *Understaffing.* The necessary placements were not being made on time, with the result that the service's employees are burdened with serving the public and fulfilling tasks beyond their duties, that is, examining files and issuing residence permits. Namely, almost all of the service's employees (even the Director) are occupied serving the public (Monday - Thursday), so that there is limited time available to examine received applications and to issue residence permits.
- *Lack of specialised staff.* Lack of cultural mediation and interpreters, resulting in difficulties in communication between the employees and Third Country Nationals (TCNs). The lack of a specific department in this area is

not due solely to lack of staff, but to the Ministry's inability to recognise the imperative need for interpreting services, translation and cultural mediation in Alien Immigration Offices.

Due to the above lack of staff and logistical infrastructure, the following problems were observed:

- *Inability to manage and serve the public.* Due to the service's limited ability to serve TCNs, people needed to come to the service several hours before it opened, and often the night before, in order to increase their chances of being served the following morning. The long wait naturally did not ensure being served and many people needed to come 2 or 3 times before managing to be served. This situation, apart from causing frustration, exhaustion and hardship, allowed some people to take advantage by drawing up 'priority lists' and certain foreigners had to pay from 5 to 50 euros in order to write their names down on the list, hoping that they would thereby ensure a place the following day (which would not happen). At the same time, there was no possibility of assessing and detecting which TCNs were in need of being granted priority. For example:
  - A. Residence permits that would expire in the next few days<sup>1</sup>
  - B. Residence permits which had already expired
  - C. Residence permits which were received already expired<sup>2</sup>
  - D. Use of specific deadlines for submitting supporting documents for specific types of permits
- *Injured employees and TCNs.* Due to the unsuitable outside area there would be queues (with no priority queue) of 200-300 people everyday pushed against the service's iron door with the sole aim of getting as close as possible so as to manage to get inside when the employee opened the door. Because of the service's limited space, people would go inside in small groups, so that each time only those closest to the door would enter. The long wait, and the desperate situation often drove many verbal attacks, and sometimes physical force between employees and TCNs, as well as between TCNs. There were times when people fainted or were injured due to the suffocating pressure because of the predicament close to the door. This situation made access to

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<sup>1</sup> The TCN is required to submit supporting documents in order to renew his permit before his permit expires. If this does not happen, he has the right to submit the documents one month after the permit has expired, but must pay a fine. In the case that over a month has lapsed, he loses any right to renewal.

<sup>2</sup> The TCN who will collect an expired permit is required to submit supporting documents for renewal within one month of the date of collection of the expired permit, otherwise he loses his right to renewal.

the service impossible for the elderly, people with disabilities, pregnant women, and anyone who did not have the physical strength to endure such conditions.

- *Long waits for very simple things.* Many people had to wait hours (often even days), in order to get the simplest information, such as which supporting documents they needed in order to renew their permits.
- *Lack of information regarding supporting documents and the procedure.* The majority of people who were coming to the service did not know exactly what they had to do, hindering not only the employees' work, but simultaneously creating long delays in the service. At the same time, the lack of information or the overloading of information led many TCNs to seek a lawyer to complete the process and for the most simple procedures regarding renewing their permits or anything else that was pending with the service. The result of this was the economic exploitation of TCNs by a large portion of lawyers, who not only charge extortionate amounts for 'courier' services<sup>3</sup>, but often create irremediable problems for their clients' residence permits, not knowing sufficiently well the legislation and the procedure that must be followed.
- *Lack of interpreting and cultural mediation services.* The Immigration Office exclusively serves foreigners, and with the exception of migrant's children (second generation), Greek is not their mother tongue. Many TCNs speak very good Greek, but others have a particularly limited knowledge of the language, or while they may speak, cannot read. For all of these people, the presence of interpreters and cultural mediators is necessary in order for them to be able to understand what is being asked of them by the service in order to renew their residence permits. Moreover, cultural mediators have the ability to understand the differences of different cultures and to behave themselves accordingly; improving not only the quality of the provided services, but essentially increasing understanding, preventing misunderstandings or relieving tension when needed.

The presence of the members of Generation 2.0 RED and the organisation's work in Decentralised Administration can be separated chronologically into 3 stages.

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<sup>3</sup> Simply submitting papers at the Service, without offering substantial legal support or being in a position to check that the file being submitted was complete. The foreigner was obliged not only to collect the papers, but often, although he had signed for legal authorisation, the lawyer took him along to the Service when there was no need.

## Stage 1: January - March



Generation 2.0 RED was present at the IO A from the first week of the One Stop Shop after reaching an agreement with the Service's Director. An informative event followed with the workers union and it was agreed that the initiative would be put into practise. We began by being present twice a week (Tuesday & Thursday) and we provided cultural mediation and consultation services to the TCNs. At the same time, an

official permit from the Ministry of Interior for our presence there was a prerequisite to insure not only our presence but also for the nature of our work at the IO A.

When the One Stop Shop was launched there was insufficient information regarding the Service's new procedures. At the same time, the TCNs were not informed about the transfer of services from the Municipalities to the Decentralised Administration Offices. The situation in the Service's courtyard for the first few months of the One Stop Shop was desperate, for the TCNs as well as for the Service's employees. Each day 300-400 people would crowd against the iron door of the IO A trying in any way possible to manage to get inside the Service so as to be served. There was no anticipation of this, and it was not possible for the staff at the IO A to manage people. Due to the weather conditions (the cold, rain, wind), the long wait created tension between the TCNs as well as with the employees.

Generation 2.0 RED took up the responsibility of managing the public in front of the Service's entrance. Some members of Generation 2.0 RED remain in the Service's courtyard space together with the TCNs trying to to manage the public<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, we served the public who wanted simple information regarding their permits, renewal<sup>5</sup>, and with supporting documents, with simultaneous interpreting where

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<sup>4</sup> Managing the public involves separating people depending on what they want to do in the Service, detecting the cases in need of being granted priority and ensuring that they are attended to.

<sup>5</sup> A characteristic example is the extension of those residence permits issued by Greece's Decentralised Administration Immigration Services that were valid from 1.01.2014 until 30.04.2014, which according to the Ministry of Interior's [Circular No.1/14-1-2014](#) remained valid five months after their date of expiration, without any need for verification. During the five-month extension the Third Country National who possesses the relevant residence permit

needed into English, French, Yoruba, Lingala, Bangla and Urdu, in the courtyard space as well as inside the Service. Managing the public under the above conditions was a particularly demanding process. There was no patience amongst the TCNs which, although understandable given the conditions, particularly hindered our work. Namely, people's frustration and desperation created tense situations which only a cultural mediator could manage. At the same time, due to the lack of staff (both police and security) which could be responsible for the creation and observance of a priority queue, Generation 2.0 RED took up this role; facilitating access to the door for people who would otherwise have no possibility of approaching the door, such as the elderly, women with small children, pregnant women, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. A significant part of managing the public has been detecting which TCNs had problems with their permits, which depending on the severity of the case means they might need special attention and or to be given priority.

It is particularly important to note that the presence of cultural mediators at the IO A was not regarded favourably by lawyers, who not only underestimated and doubted our work, but also treated us as rival for two reasons. Firstly, because we were giving free consultation services to the TCNs, and secondly because our presence there rendered their own services useless, particularly when we pinpointed the errors in their work, which sometimes cost TCNs their residence permits. Our role however was not to replace the lawyers but to facilitate matters for TCNs so that they do not need to have a lawyer-intermediary in order to converse with the Service. In other words, the lawyers' services should be a choice and not a need for TCNs, and should concern specific issues and not be simply in order to communicate with the service.

## Stage 2: April - June B:

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is a legal resident in Greek territory. Requests to renew the validity of the above residence permits may be accepted throughout the extension period as long as a significant reason is documented. TCNs were not correctly informed about the extension (who was entitled to it, for how long, and which permits were extended) resulting in some coming to renew although they have been given an extension and others supposing that the extension applied to their own permit, with the result that they would come a long time after its expiration and many lost their right to renewal.



In order to avoid huge crowds of people at the entrance of the service's courtyard area and more specifically to avoid accidents due to people crowding at the service's central door, in April 2014 a priority list system was created, where people would put their names down for the following few days in order to ensure that all those who approached the service could be served. In this way, the iron gate at the entrance of the Service's courtyard area was locked and only those whose names were on the list would be allowed through. These lists were initially drawn up by the private security staff and were handed over to the Service's staff at the end of the day. However, from mid-April, Generation 2.0 RED took over the responsibility of drawing up priority lists and making appointments<sup>6</sup> because we knew how to put them together more fairly, but also for the following reasons:

- A. Ensuring a place on the list for urgent cases (eg. expired permits)
- B. Direct service without needing to be on the list for all those wanting only supporting documents
- C. Ensuring transparency in the procedure

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the Service's limited ability to accept the public, the procedure of accessing the Service worked in the following way: TCNs would approach the Service in order to book an appointment for another day. If they wanted information which we were unable to provide or to collect their residence permits, we would book them an appointment for another day (therefore they would need to come to the Service twice overall assuming that they managed to secure an appointment for another day. There were people who, in order to manage to to book an appointment, had to come two or three times). If they wanted to renew their residence permits, we would book them appointments for renewal, so that on the same day we booked the appointment they would go to the relevant employee, who would book an appointment for submitting documents (so that they would come three times overall in order to renew their permits). Access to the Service the same day was impossible with the exception of the special cases mentioned above.



D. Ensuring entrance to the Service without needing to be on the list for pregnant women, people with disabilities, the elderly, those who are sick (with proof from the hospital) and mothers with small children.

Since the beginning of April 2014, and as it became more necessary for Generation 2.0 RED to be present, we have been at the IO A daily (Monday - Thursday, 8.30am-2.30pm).

A. Internship for Students from Panteion University at Generation 2.0 RED in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior.

On 23 April 2014 seven students from the Department of International and European Studies at Panteion University started a 3 month internship with the organisation Generation 2.0 RED. Three out of the seven students who took part were of migrant origin. The internship was arranged with the cooperation of the Ministry of Interior and took place at the Immigration Office for Athens A.

The internship's objectives were:

- Cultural Mediation
- Online File Tracking
- Interpreting
- Booking appointments

B. Pilot implementation of the Online File Tracking System

The time when Generation 2.0 RED were granted to work with the Service - shortly after the beginning of the student internship programme - coincided with the implementation of the new online File Tracking System developed by the Ministry of Interior. With the help of this software, TCNs could check from home whether their residence permits had been released or whether any supporting documents were missing. This service aimed to decrease the number of people approaching IOs in order to learn about when their permits would be issued. Generation 2.0 RED undertook the pilot implementation of the new software; helping substantially to identify problems in its running as well as problems in the subsequent amendments, before it would be implemented fully.

C. Training the newly transferred employees at the IO A

In mid-June employees were transferred to the Decentralised Administration IO. These employees came from bodies that were unrelated or had no previous experience with Migration (eg. Municipal Police). Generation 2.0 RED took up the basic training of ten employees who would staff the newly-established Information Department. The Ministry's Director and others in the department had not revealed

this information until then. Training the new employees from the Municipal Police included:

- Basic knowledge on Immigration and legislation, especially the New Immigration and Social Integration Code<sup>7</sup> (4251/14)
- Specialised knowledge on the categories of Residence Permits and Supporting Documents
- Specialised knowledge on the procedure of issuing and renewing Residence Permits in the case file
- Basic knowledge on managing the public

At the same time, members of Generation 2.0 RED, together with the young employees, were trained by the Ministry in how to use the electronic system to access TCNs' files. Since the launch of the Information Department, the number of TCNs who are attended to on a daily basis has increased (from 100 to 150 people per day).

### Stage 3: July - now

The increase in the number of employees at IO A led to an improvement in the provided services as well as making the process less troublesome for the TCNs. Namely:

- An increase in the overall number of TCNs that it was possible for the Service to attend to daily. The daily number of TCNs personally submitting documents increased from 60 to 110, for collecting permits from 60 to 110, and for information requests from 100 to 280.
- Complete elimination of priority lists. Almost all of the TCNs who approached the Service managed to book an appointment for the submission or renewal of their permits. At the same time, the submission of supporting documents, changes of address or marital status happens the same day. Furthermore, appointments for submitting documents and applications are made directly through the Information Department.
- Providing cultural mediation, interpreting and translation services in five languages (English, French, Yoruba, Urdu and Albanian) for all stages of the

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<sup>7</sup> The New Immigration and Social Integration Code is available on the Ministry of Interior website:  
[http://www.ypes.gr/el/Generalsecretariat\\_PopulationSC/general\\_directorate\\_migration/diefthinsi\\_metanastefitikis\\_politikhs/NOMOI/](http://www.ypes.gr/el/Generalsecretariat_PopulationSC/general_directorate_migration/diefthinsi_metanastefitikis_politikhs/NOMOI/)

procedure, from providing information to submitting supporting documents in order to renew and collect permits.

Also, putting a cover over the Service's outside area has created relatively humane waiting conditions, although it is still necessary to put in seats, toilets and drinking fountains. The exterior iron gate is not locked and the TCNs can enter the courtyard at any time. Every morning at 8am, an employee gives out the corresponding appointment numbers to the TCNs who have a prearranged appointment for submission or collection, as well as 200 appointment numbers for information requests to people coming for the first time. After attending to 200 people who have an Information number, the Information Department allows those TCNs who have not managed to receive a number to enter, and attends to all those who come to the Service before 1.30pm. Furthermore, throughout the day, the members of Generation 2.0 RED identify people from the courtyard who should have priority so that they can be attended to immediately.

As of 9 August 2014, it is possible for TCNs to access the online file tracking system at [pf.emigrants.ypes.gr](http://pf.emigrants.ypes.gr)



## CONCLUSIONS

From January 2014 up to now, Generation 2.0 RED has been offering daily cultural mediation, consultation, translation and interpreting services to TCNs who approach the IO A. The aim of this operation is twofold. On the one hand, it is to improve the provided services which have been offered daily over the past 8 months to thousands of TCNs. On the other hand, it is to provide a correct, substantial and direct service for TCNs. Overall, the presence of Generation 2.0 RED at the IO A has substantially contributed to:

- An increase in the number of TCNs who are served each day by the Service

- Free access to cultural mediation, consultation, interpreting and translation services as far as possible and access to the service for people who do not speak Greek well without a lawyer-intermediary.
- Facilitating access to the Service for vulnerable groups (pregnant women, the elderly, people with disabilities)
- Managing the public in the service's courtyard area
- Relieving tensions between TCNs and employees
- Relieving tensions between TCNs
- Detecting problems in the functioning of & proposed amendments for the online file processing software
- Educating the Service's young employees
- Providing recommendations to the Ministry regarding the implementation of the New Migration Code. From the start of Generation 2.0 RED's presence at the IO A, we were in contact with the Ministry of Interior, having secured the permit required. There was close cooperation with the Ministry, especially from June 2014 when the New Immigration Code came into effect. Generation 2.0 RED communicated to the Ministry the Code's gaps and shortcomings, which were met with on a daily basis.

On the other hand, the underlying aim of the operation, which is to focus on creating a culture of personal responsibility by each foreigner for his papers. Namely, an important part of the services offered to TCNs was:

- Explaining all of the stages of the procedure of issuing and renewing permits with the aim of rendering the procedure understandable to everyone.
- Trying to refute 'myths' such as, *'my lawyer will sort out my papers', 'my lawyer knows about everything', 'if you pay more then a lawyer will get the permit for you', 'renewing is a difficult procedure and I can't do it on my own', 'the service didn't give me a permit on purpose' 'because my cousin told me not to submit an application for my wife and that it didn't matter'.* Every day we had examples of TCNs who were facing problems with their papers because they trusted the wrong lawyer, listened to the opinion of a friend or relation who did not have the right information, did not look properly into the case, stopped the process because it was causing them problems or because they did not have money for the administration fee, did not renew their spouse's permit in order to save money or forgot to collect their permits in time.

- Explaining to everyone that each individual's papers are his own responsibility and not that of his lawyer, father, spouse or mother, and that a mistake or delay could cost him his own permit. Namely:
  - o we encourage all second-generation children to take responsibility for the renewal of their own permits and to submit their own applications for the second-generation permit (5 years).
  - o we encourage parents to push their children after 18 to deal with their own papers so as to become accustomed to the process. A daily phenomenon is parents who come to renew the permit for their 30 year old 'child'.
  - o we encourage all those who speak Greek and especially the second generation to use the Internet so as to have direct access to information related to permits (supporting documents, administration fees etc.)
- Understanding that it is better to submit an application lacking supporting documents rather than not to submit the application at all or to be late.
- Understanding that a lawyer is a choice and not a necessity (with the exception of refugees in court after a rejection).
- Understanding that the Services at IO A are free of charge for everyone, and that anyone who asks for money can be pressed charges.
- Understanding that there is no need for 'intermediaries' or any individual from the communities who asks for money in order to provide 'information'. Information is free and accessible to all those who approach the Service.
- Understanding that most of those who fall victim to exploitation from circuits of lawyers or compatriots are responsible for this, because they preferred to take the easy option rather than to come to the Service and ask the employees.
- Creating trust towards the Service and its employees. The Service does not favour anyone and the employees are there to help as much as they can.

Generation 2.0 RED believes that a relationship of trust between the services and the TCNs can significantly decrease the number of people who are facing problems with their papers. At the same time, encouraging each TCN to have a personal sense of responsibility towards his papers and to be personally involved in his own case is a step towards people being responsible and is a way to fight exploitation.