

Being born in Greece may not make you Greek

A native Greek speaker and the star of a popular Greek music video to boot, Athina Bontigao – daughter of Filipino immigrants – is fighting for citizenship, along with thousands like her.

When Athina Bontigao walks down the streets of this city of her birth, most Greeks don't see a compatriot, they see a foreigner, a xenos. Sometimes, especially lately, police stop her and ask to see her papers. On the bus, she hears old ladies complain about "all these dirty foreigners" coming to their country. They're looking at her.

Ms. Bontigao has lived all her 18 years in Athens, but she has an Asian face and Filipino parents. And although she carries the name of a Greek goddess – the patron deity of this ancient city – as far as the state is concerned, she's still a migrant, just temporarily passing through.

But that's not how Bontigao sees herself.

"Inside me, it's like everything is Greek," she says. "Greek is my first language. I know the culture here, the history. I know everything." She shrugs, adding with frustration: "I don't even know the history of the Philippines."

In her neighborhood school, Bontigao was the only non-Greek. She recently starred in a Greek music video by her favorite singer, but didn't learn to speak Tagalog, her parents' mother tongue, until she was a teenager. She prefers souvlakia – Greek grilled meat – to her mother's Filipino cooking.

"Like, Filipino food, it's just rice, rice, rice," she says with a giggle. She's only been to the Philippines a few times and never spent more than a month there – the smells, the crowds, the lack of privacy, she says, all feel foreign to her.

But the only passport Bontigao carries, and the only country she has permanent right to live in, is the Philippines.

Greece, like most European countries, does not give automatic citizenship to children born in the country. And becoming a naturalized citizen is a long, difficult process: Greece makes it harder than almost any other country in the European Union – only Austria is tougher. It's also the only one of the original EU 15 that makes no special provisions for children born to immigrants in the country. Members of the Greek diaspora, in contrast, can get a passport easily.

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It's a workday evening and Athens' central square, Syntagma, is bustling: Bankers rush to the metro as tourists snap pictures of the evzones – red-capped, skirt-clad soldiers with pom-poms on their feet who guard parliament.

Bontigao and several Filipino friends are clustered near a fountain, clutching creased petitions asking for Greece to grant citizenship to children like them. Nervously, they approach passersby, making their case for a signature: They were born here and should have the right to Greek citizenship.

Often, it's disheartening work. Many people rush by, declining to stop with a wave of their hand. An old lady listens to their spiel – in Greek – shakes her head, and refuses to sign. Younger people are more likely to be supportive: A young man with a guitar adds his name to the list, as does a businesswoman in



a smart suit and heels.

"Some of them are kind of racist. They give a lot of reasons for not signing the campaign," Bontigao says. "It feels bad, but other people give us strength by saying, 'yeah, you should have this citizenship, you were born here.'"

Not far away, another scene is playing out. Policemen have approached three Arab men sitting on a bench and are examining their papers. They search the men's pockets; asking them what they're doing, why they're here.

The Filipino girls watch warily as one man is led away. In recent months, Athens has been cracking down on illegal immigration – authorities call it "Operation Sweep" – and the girls say they worry constantly about the police finding something wrong with their papers. Bontigao has been questioned twice.

Immigrants here, even legal ones, live in a constant state of insecurity. Most must renew their residence permits every two years, but Greece's immigration bureaucracy is so overloaded that permits aren't usually approved until just before they expire. So Bontigao, her parents, and most other migrants are trapped in an unending cycle of applications. They're legal while they're waiting for their permits to be processed, but can only leave the country during specific amnesty periods, usually at Christmas, Easter, and for two weeks in August. That instability is particularly hard on kids, like Bontigao, who have integrated culturally.

"They fall within the same exact rules that rule the lives of their parents and the lives of immigrants who arrived in the country yesterday," says Miltiadis Pavlou, from the Institute for Rights, Equality and Diversity in Athens. "When they become adults, they have to find a job, find an employer to remain legally in the country, or face going to a country they have never known."

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Edwina and Danny Bontigao met in the Greek port city of Piraeas – today, effectively a suburb of Athens – more than 20 years ago. He was a sailor; she was a domestic worker. In those days, immigration was so new to Greece that the country lacked an official pol-

icy.

For most of the 20th century, Greeks themselves emigrated in large numbers for economic reasons. At the time Bontigaos arrived, at the vanguard of the current immigration wave, the country's most recent immigration law dated to 1929. Baby Athina went with her parents as they marched and protested for legal status for immigrants.

They finally won that battle in 1997.

Today, Greece is a wealthy, EU country and immigration is a fact of life. There are half a million legal migrants and probably as many undocumented ones. Many of those are from neighboring Albania, but there are an increasing number of Africans and Asians. In certain Athens neighborhoods, like the seedy streets around the city's central market, Greek faces are far out-numbered by those of other ancestry.

In a country whose modern identity is based on the myth that Greece is a homogenous nation, bonded by its shared Orthodox Christian religion, many find this wave of new arrivals unsettling.

Last year, in the country's most recent election, a far-right, anti-immigration party won seats in parliament for the first time.

"I think, it's older people who mostly don't really accept the fact that there are foreigners coming to the country, because they're not used to it," says Athina. "The younger people, they go to school with foreigners. They see that we're not like the bad things that people say, that we're thieves and bad to Greeks."

For her, time is running out. A few months ago, she turned 18 and her current permit expires in February. She worries she will have to leave school – she's studying for a business degree – and get a job, that she'll be pigeonholed into low-paying domestic work. In Greece, filipineza is slang for "maid."

The government says it will amend the law to give immigrant children born in Greece five-year-long residence permits when they turn 18. It's not citizenship, but it's a step.

Athina just wants to be a teenager; to worry about school and boys and clothes. But she has to fight for the right to belong. "I'm just normal, a normal Greek kid."