States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode 26 "Bitter Harvest: Immigrant Labor and the Future of Greek Agriculture – with Christos Giannakakis"

Enhanced Transcript

By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: In this interview, Emmanuel Comte sits down with Christos Giannakakis, Vice-President of the New Hellenic Confederation of Agricultural Cooperatives (ETHEAS), to discuss the untold story of who keeps Greek agriculture alive. With over 90% of fruit and vegetable harvesting now dependent on foreign labor, this conversation dives into the pressing reality of migrant workers—many undocumented—who underpin the country's food system. As Greek farmers grapple with labor shortages, Emmanuel and Christos explore how slow bureaucracies, restrictive immigration policies, and rising wages are reshaping the agricultural landscape. From the decline of Albanian labor to the unrealized promise of bilateral deals with Egypt, this episode reveals why Greece—and much of Europe—can no longer ignore the role of immigrant farmworkers. This is essential listening for anyone interested in food security, labor migration, rural economies, and the future of European agriculture.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: In the orchards of Imathia and the greenhouses of Messenia, Greek agriculture remains alive—but who is sustaining it? Over 90% of the labor involved in harvesting Greece's fruits and vegetables today is carried out by foreign workers. Yet, many of these laborers remain invisible—not only in public discourse but also in the policies that directly affect their lives and working conditions.

In this interview, we shift our attention away from Europe's borders and cities, focusing instead on its countryside, where immigration plays a critical role in shaping food systems, rural economies, and social structures.

My guest today is Christos Giannakakis, Vice President of the new Hellenic Confederation of Agricultural Cooperatives (ETHEAS). A leading voice in Greek agricultural governance, Mr. Giannakakis has spent decades working closely with producers, policymakers, and rural communities. Together, we'll explore some of the most pressing questions: Can Greek agriculture survive without migrant workers? Why do so many farms depend on undocumented labor? What makes it so difficult to hire foreign workers legally? And how does immigration impact rural societies?

This interview offers an on-the-ground perspective on how immigrant labor sustains and shapes both the agricultural economy and rural life.

Mr. Giannakakis, thank you very much for receiving me here in your office. How did you first come to engage with the issue of migrant labor in Greek agriculture?

Bitter Harvest: Immigrant Labor and the Future of Greek Agriculture – with Christos Giannakakis

A History of Labor – From Local to Foreign Hands

Christos Giannakakis: The Greek agricultural economy has depended on foreign labor for the past 30 years. Until about three years ago, the majority of agricultural labor needs were met by Albanian workers. These individuals either lived permanently in Greece or entered temporarily, often with tourist visas, to work during specific cultivation and harvest periods. Once their work was done, they would return to Albania.

However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of available Albanian workers sharply declined. This shortage has created significant problems for Greek agricultural production, both in planting and in harvesting. Compounding the issue is the rise in daily wages: four years ago, the average was around €25–26 per day. Today, it's between €40 and €60. These labor costs are becoming unsustainable, and even at these rates, it's difficult to find workers.

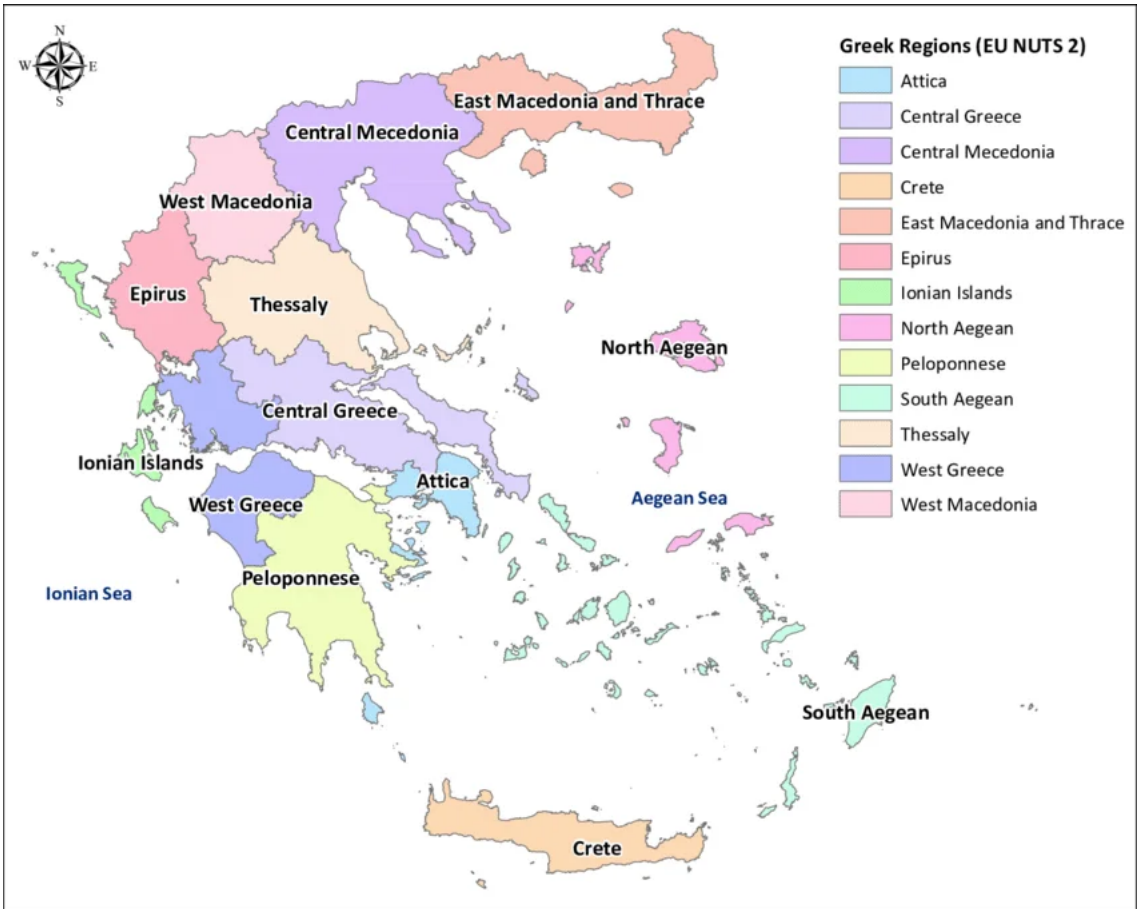
As a result, farmers' income is strained, and many cannot afford to cultivate their land properly. Additionally, the cost of transporting products to markets has increased, which further burdens consumers.

Beyond the Albanian workforce, a significant portion of our labor needs used to be filled by migrants who had entered Greece illegally and were staying in reception centers—both on the islands and the mainland. Now, their numbers have also dropped considerably.

Heightened police enforcement has made farmers reluctant to employ undocumented workers. Consequently, we are turning to legal avenues to bring in labor from third countries. This approach allows us to both justify the expense in our financial records and ensure the proper management of our farms.

Emmanuel Comte: So, what you're saying is that Greek farms have always needed immigrant workers—going back some 30 years. This reliance began as early as the 1990s?

Christos Giannakakis: Yes, foreign labor has been essential for decades. Initially, before 1985, agricultural labor was provided through internal migration. People from poorer regions of Greece—such as the mountainous villages of Western Macedonia or remote areas of Thrace with Muslim populations—would move to more prosperous agricultural zones to work.



Toward the late 1980s, Polish workers began arriving when the Polish government lifted restrictions on international travel. That helped cover some of our labor shortages. Later, after political changes swept through Eastern Europe, particularly in Albania, many Albanians began migrating—often illegally—to Greece, significantly contributing to our labor force.

Regions cultivating fruits and vegetables have always required additional hands. Initially, these came from within Greece, then from neighboring Balkan countries, and eventually from more distant nations.

Present Realities — Who Harvests Greece's Food?

Emmanuel Comte: How would you describe the current labor needs of Greek agricultural cooperatives? To what extent are Greek farms dependent on foreign labor, whether permanent or seasonal?

Christos Giannakakis: Permanent workers are mainly employed in livestock farming, greenhouses, and small tree nurseries. For other types of crops—such as fruits, olives, and citrus—we rely primarily on seasonal workers.

In these types of cultivation, the legal limit for hiring seasonal farm workers is nine months. Those who are employed as seasonal workers are paid using what's known as the *ergosimo*. The *ergosimo* is the minimum daily wage established by the National Collective Agreement. From this amount, 10% is withheld for the insurance organization, which provides health coverage.

In contrast, permanent workers are typically employed in facilities like factories, sorting centers, and packing houses. These workers can stay for up to one year and are compensated with a social security stamp, rather than the *ergosimo*.

So, in primary agriculture, we mainly see seasonal workers in the fields, greenhouses, and nurseries, while permanent workers are found in processing and packing facilities.

Emmanuel Comte: Those are the legal conditions—but in practice, how essential are foreign workers to Greek farms? Are they crucial to harvesting and the operation of cooperatives and firms, or do they play more of a marginal role?

Christos Giannakakis: Based on our estimates, the primary agricultural sector in Greece requires approximately 60,000 to 70,000 seasonal workers. We try to bring in as many as we can through legal channels.

Let me give you an example. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, borders were closed, and international movement was restricted. In response, cooperatives, including mine, worked to obtain a special permit. I personally contacted the Albanian government, and an agreement was made between Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime Minister, and Edi Rama, the Prime Minister of Albania. As a result, borders were opened for agricultural workers.

Mr. Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania

These workers arrived in closed buses, wearing masks and gloves. For the first time, 32,000 of them were officially recorded. Most were needed in Central Macedonia, with fewer required in Southern Greece.

However, in Southern Greece, there was also a large number of undocumented workers, mostly from Bangladesh, but also from countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. We estimate that approximately 15,000 undocumented workers were in the Western Peloponnese region, where strawberries are grown. Another 10,000 were in Crete, particularly in the greenhouses.

This brings us to about 25,000 undocumented workers and 30,000 legally registered Albanian workers—a total of 55,000. That aligns with our estimate of needing 60,000 to 70,000 seasonal workers. This need was validated by a preliminary survey conducted in 2020.

Working in the Shadows – Irregular Employment

Emmanuel Comte: I understand that foreign workers play a crucial role in Greek agriculture. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgent need for labor to support fruit harvesting and the olive oil sector. Workers from Albania, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are especially involved in harvesting fruits and olives—areas where local labor is hard to find. From your experience, how widespread is the employment of undocumented or irregular migrant workers on Greek farms? Would you consider it a common practice, or more of a marginal phenomenon?

Christos Giannakakis: The need to legalize individuals who entered the country illegally was particularly urgent in the Peloponnese and Crete, where such labor was being utilized. There was a widespread but incorrect rumor that the number of undocumented workers in Greece was around 300,000. In reality, the number was closer to 30,000. These workers were vital for agricultural production and highly experienced.

Not legalizing these 30,000 workers would have been a mistake. When the question of whether to proceed with legalization arose, we—representing the National Union of Agricultural Cooperatives—took a clear stance. We sent a letter to all political parties, urging them to pass the amendment in Parliament.

In fact, the letter I personally signed was used by the government during the parliamentary debate to demonstrate that the initiative had the backing of cooperative organizations and farmers. This wasn't a government-driven decision for other political purposes—it was genuinely needed.

The original deadline for worker legalization was set for October 31, 2024. However, by that date, many needs remained unmet, and not all applications had been submitted or reviewed. Therefore, we requested that the Ministry of Migration amend the law and extend the deadline.

Until this amendment was officially enacted, the Central Service of the Ministry in Athens issued a verbal directive to local offices to accept applications. These would later be validated retroactively from January 1, 2025. This process was indeed followed.

However, when the new Minister of Migration, Mr. Makis Voridis, assumed office, he initially announced that no further legalizations would take place. We intervened once again, explaining that it would be a mistake. With government encouragement, we had advised farmers to submit their applications with the understanding that the law would be amended retroactively.

Mr. Mavroudis Voridis, Oct. 2019

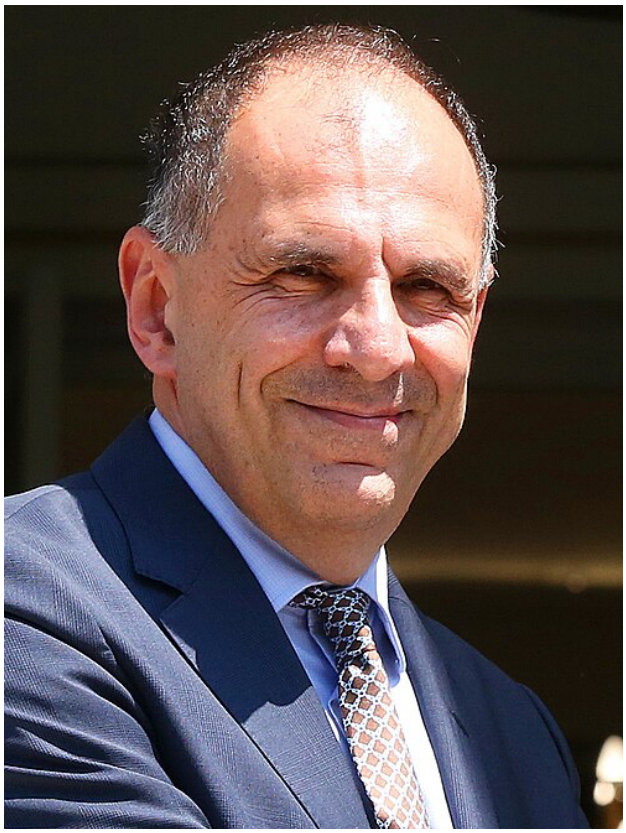
Mr. Voridis ultimately agreed that all applications submitted by the end of March 2025 would be legalized through a new law. He even sent us an official document confirming this commitment.

Mr. Voridis' policy, while aiming to be strict, seeks to bring order to the system and ensure that all foreign workers in Greece are legal. We work closely with the Ministry to help them understand the problems on the ground.

Bureaucracy vs. Reality — Legal Pathways Blocked

Christos Giannakakis: The biggest challenge in bringing legal workers to Greece lies with the embassies and consulates abroad. These offices take an excessively long time to process applications. As a result, applications pile up, and the workers grow tired of waiting. Many eventually decide not to come to Greece, leaving our agricultural labor needs unmet.

I'm aware that Minister Voridis has submitted a proposal to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.



Mr. Makis Voridis, Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs

The idea is that for countries with bilateral agreements with Greece, prospective workers should not be required to attend interviews at consulates. Instead, they would only need to complete the necessary documentation, provide criminal record checks, submit medical certificates proving they are free from infectious diseases, and comply with all Schengen and Greek Immigration Code requirements.

This proposal is currently under consideration. We hope it will be accepted, as it would allow us to sign more bilateral agreements and eliminate the need for consular interviews, which are a major bottleneck. We are awaiting the outcome.

Emmanuel Comte: Okay, so I understand that at ETHEAS, you play an intermediary role between cooperatives on one hand and the government on the other. You're trying to align situations where farmers need workers urgently—such as during harvest—and you're helping to expedite the bureaucratic process so these workers can obtain documentation. However, delays often lead to mismatches.

My question is this: Do you think the issue is mostly about timing? That is, farmers need workers faster than the bureaucracy can provide them. Or is it also a matter of cost?

For example, legal workers can lead to higher costs for farms in terms of taxes, social security contributions, and wages. So, are farmers willing to pay these legal obligations, or are some of them unable or unwilling to meet these financial requirements? What is the main motivation behind employing irregular workers, especially in Peloponnese and Crete? Is it primarily about timing, or is it more about cost?

Christos Giannakakis: First, the main issue is where we source these workers from. When we look to countries like Vietnam, India, or Thailand, the distance is substantial, the travel time is significant, the journey is complex, and the cost is high.

We have reliable information indicating that workers from those countries pay exorbitant fees—often between $6,000 and $9,000—to manpower agencies just to secure employment in Greece. This creates a major financial burden for the workers.

Now, consider that these workers can legally stay in Greece for up to nine months. If they work 25 days a month, that's about 225 working days. At a daily wage of €40, their total earnings would be €9,000. If they've already spent €6,000 or more just to get here, they are left with only about €3,000, assuming everything goes smoothly. That's simply not sustainable or appealing to them.

We propose creating a system where workers can apply online, perhaps by paying a small application fee of €50 to ensure genuine interest. This system would allow Greek authorities to view their resume, passport, photo, age, and other essential information directly—cutting out expensive intermediary agencies entirely.

The second issue lies with the Greek consular authorities. According to Greek law, once an application is submitted in Greece, a decision should be made within 10 days. Our embassies abroad are supposed to respond within two months.

Until recently, applications were submitted in handwritten form, requiring employees to manually enter all the data—causing delays and even opportunities for corruption, such as paying to move a file up in the queue. Fortunately, the system has recently become electronic. Now, applications are loged online and queued automatically, making it fairer and more efficient.

However, embassies still don't adhere to the two-month deadline. They cite a lack of staff as the reason. Each candidate interview can take 30 to 45 minutes, which significantly slows down the process.

Regarding wages, we are not avoiding legal obligations. We pay beyond what's required—often €50 or €60 per day, when the legal daily wage is around €38–39. Our problem isn't cost—it's the lack of available workers.

In Central Macedonia, we typically need workers for just four months. Workers from distant countries are unlikely to come for such a short time. That's why we must also find employment opportunities for them in other parts of Greece to make the trip worthwhile.

Egypt as a Missed Opportunity

Christos Giannakakis: Egypt, on the other hand, is a highly viable solution.

It's just a 90-minute flight away, and a ticket costs only €130.

Two years ago, Greece signed a bilateral agreement with Egypt, where the Egyptian Ministry of Employment would find and recommend workers—again, with no middlemen involved.

But the problem was implementation. The Egyptian Ministry submitted a list of workers to the Greek system without essential details—no passport numbers, resumes, or photos. As a result, it was impossible to assess or contact the candidates.

Although the agreement provided for 5,000 workers, only about 150–170 came. When Minister Voridis asked me why we weren't using the agreement, I explained that we simply couldn't reach or evaluate the candidates.

To resolve this, ETHEAS was appointed by the Greek government to implement the Greek-Egyptian agreement. We hired a Greek employee fluent in Arabic, and I arranged a visit to Cairo to discuss practical implementation. Our proposal is to conduct interviews via WhatsApp. This allows us to see the worker, hear them, and evaluate their qualifications before making recommendations to farmers.

If Minister Voridis' current proposal to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Gerapetritis, is accepted, it will exempt these workers from embassy interviews. This would dramatically shorten the timeline—bringing it down to just one to one-and-a-half months for a worker to arrive and begin work.

Also, consider that the daily wage in Egypt is around €5. In Greece, it's €40. So, even working just four to five months in Greece can provide Egyptian workers with a very substantial income—especially when they don't have to pay large fees to manpower agencies or spend much on travel.

So, yes—this approach offers a realistic, effective solution for both Greek farmers and foreign workers.

Wage Dynamics and Market Forces

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned bureaucratic delays, which I understand make things very complicated for cooperatives. But I keep coming back to a question.

I've heard about the disagreements between Egypt and Greece, and about the platform that was created to match job offers and job requests. Yet, many farmers seem reluctant to use it.

You also mentioned that the average wage in Egypt is around five euros per day. In Greece, the minimum wage is approximately 38 or 40 euros per day. So even if Greek farmers don't pay exactly the minimum wage or don't cover additional social security costs, Egyptian workers would still view the working conditions as favorable.

Do you think that some farmers may be taking advantage of this situation—thinking, "These workers earn five euros in Egypt, I can pay them less here and they'll still be happy"?

Christos Giannakakis: Only I know the wage in Egypt is about five euros per day. When there's a surplus of available labor, some employers may not pay the minimum wage. But when there's a severe labor shortage, the situation changes—workers can pressure or even force employers to pay significantly more.

And today farmers are generally paying more than the minimum wage. Except for a few isolated cases, most workers receive wages that are well above the legal minimum.

Emmanuel Comte: So when there's an available labor supply, some farmers may still try to pay a bit less—especially if the workers are undocumented. Is that correct?

Christos Giannakakis: Yes, that happens. But in today's market, if you pay less, the worker will simply go to another job. There's no real space to underpay workers now.

Emmanuel Comte: So you're saying that it's no longer feasible to pay less than the minimum wage, even if someone wanted to?

Christos Giannakakis: Exactly. That's correct.

Emmanuel Comte: And what about social security contributions—do workers care whether these are paid?

Christos Giannakakis: The issue we're facing now is that some workers prefer not to be paid legally. They want to receive their wages in cash, off the books—what we call "black money."

Why? I'm not sure exactly. Perhaps it's because legal payments involve a 10% deduction for social security. For example, if I pay 40 euros a day, the bank keeps 10% for social security. Some workers want to avoid that deduction and prefer cash.

But this is a big problem for us farmers. If I pay in cash, I can't declare the expense in my accounting records. That means I can't reduce my taxable income. We need everything to go through the legal system.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you think farms could survive if they did everything legally—paying the minimum wage, covering social security contributions, etc.? Or are there some farms that would struggle to stay in business if they had to follow all the rules?

Christos Giannakakis: In the last three years, many farmers have left the agricultural profession entirely because the income is too low. The agricultural sector is struggling. So yes, for some farmers, paying everything by the book might push them out of business.

Innovating to Survive – Mechanization in Agriculture

Emmanuel Comte: There are many forms of challenges, I see. That's quite interesting.

So, in your role at ETHEAS, what initiatives have you undertaken to help farmers meet their labor needs at a cost that is sustainable for them? What projects are you working on in this regard?

Christos Giannakakis: We believe Greek agriculture must move more decisively toward mechanization. For example, thirty years ago, cotton was harvested by hand. If that were still the case today, cotton cultivation would have ceased—there simply aren't enough workers, and the cost is prohibitively high.

Mechanization enabled farming to continue. The same principle applies to other sectors, such as fruit farming. On my own land, I use a linear cultivation system—Palmette—along with mechanical ladders and anti-hail nets. This reduces the number of workers needed and significantly increases labor productivity.

A worker using mechanical systems can be over 50% more productive, and crop yields are higher as well.

As an organization, our message to farmers is clear: evolve your cultivation methods. Abandon traditional approaches. Adopt linear cultivation, install drip irrigation, and use fertigation techniques to deliver nutrients efficiently, reducing both chemical usage and environmental impact.

This transition allows for fewer workers, less chemical input, and higher productivity.

Emmanuel Comte: And can farmers easily access credit to invest in these machines? Since mechanization can be costly, are there financing options available?

Christos Giannakakis: Yes, we have European funding programs in place. Initially, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) covered up to 80% of the cost for crop restructuring—this includes planting new crops in linear formations and purchasing machinery.

Now, the Ministry of Rural Development offers programs through the European Union's Rural Development Policy, which subsidizes 50% to 60% of machinery purchases.

So, both national and European funds are available. If farmers choose to utilize them, they can make the necessary investments. I've personally made use of these programs myself.

Housing the Workforce – Living Conditions for Migrants

Emmanuel Comte: Very interesting. One last question: how do you perceive the presence of immigrant workers in rural communities?

Do they live separately or on the farms? How well do they integrate into rural society? Or are they highly mobile, coming and going with the seasons? From a social perspective, how do they live in the countryside?

Christos Giannakakis: Until now, most farmers have provided basic accommodations for their workers free of charge—sleeping quarters, kitchens, toilets, and bathing facilities.

However, we are now advocating for the establishment of proper settlements using prefabricated housing—containers with appropriate amenities. These would include bathrooms, kitchens, air conditioning, and overall humane living conditions.

ETHEAS has formally requested that the Ministry of Rural Development include such housing in their subsidy programs. An 18-square-meter container can house up to four people and costs about €6,000. With a 50% subsidy, that becomes €3,000—an affordable investment for long-term infrastructure.

We are encouraging cooperatives to purchase these containers collectively to support their member farmers.

Emmanuel Comte: So those are the housing conditions. And socially, do these workers have a visible presence in local villages?

Since these containers might concentrate immigrant workers in specific areas, does that raise concerns? For instance, you mentioned workers from Bangladesh and Vietnam, who must be quite different from the local population. Does their presence cause any social tension?

Christos Giannakakis: There have been occasional issues with worker concentrations, but we believe that if each farmer houses only the workers they need, potential problems will be minimized.

We don’t deny that tensions may arise, but dispersing workers across farms rather than centralizing them helps.

In general, our approach is proactive. We monitor the situation closely and encourage integration wherever possible.

Human Dignity and Labor Migration

Emmanuel Comte: That was a very informative overview of the immigrant workforce in Greek agriculture—how they are employed, how they live, the alternatives to manual labor, and the overall socioeconomic context.

Thank you very much for sharing these insights with us.

Christos Giannakakis: Thank you as well. I’m happy to answer any other questions if needed.

Emmanuel Comte: I think we’re good for now. If you’d like to share a concluding thought, please feel free.

Christos Giannakakis: I belong to the group of people who believe that every worker—regardless of their country of origin or religious beliefs—is a fellow human being. They deserve our hospitality, respect, and protection.

There were times when Greeks, facing poverty and persecution, emigrated to seek work. Just as we hoped to be welcomed abroad, we must now extend the same courtesy to those who come here.

When I witness inappropriate behavior toward workers, I intervene immediately—both by confronting the offenders and by notifying the authorities—because, above all, we are human beings.

Emmanuel Comte: Absolutely. Thank you very much.