

Addressing the Needs of Refugees For Health and Education: Have Greece and the EU Done Enough?

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ABSTRACT

Migration is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. In the 21st century, it has become a major security issue as large numbers of people flee their country for safety or better living conditions. Over time, Europe shoulders the majority of the responsibility for Middle East and African migration flows. The current Ukrainian conflict highlights the need for more concerted and common migration policies in the context of protecting human life, especially when several states bear the brunt of migration flows. Greece has faced the challenge of accepting and integrating large numbers of refugees since 2015. Greece has adopted different policy measures and approaches to address the migration crisis in recent years, but the level of refugees' needs and lack of financial resources hinder their effectiveness. Greek response to migrants' integration is significant but partial. The health sector and refugees' access to health care have long been dysfunctional, while education initiatives have been more successful. Greek governments have been criticized for how they handled migration flows, but attention must also be paid to how the EU reacted to the crisis and how well values like solidarity and collectivity were preserved.

Keywords: Access to Education, Access to Healthcare, European Union, Greece, Refugees.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, refugee crises have been one of the greatest challenges that international actors and governments have to confront. The unanticipated and constantly variable structure of the international system along with the forces of globalization, often create instability both to state actors and the relation between them. Although the 21st century is marked by a significant number of low-intensed and more regional conflicts (Ero & Atwood, 2022), the ramifications concerning the migrant flows globally are major.

Among them, the most recent escalation of Ukrainian conflict has led to more than 5 million civilians fleeing Ukraine in search of protection and safety (UNHCR, 2022a), challenging the capabilities of the international order to respond effectively to crises. Undoubtedly, the migration flows from Ukraine were an additional burden to the huge humanitarian crisis that already existed from 2011, when internal turbulence in countries of Middle East and Africa emerged. However, 2015 was the peak year when an unprecedented and massive flow of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers crossed borders and migrated to Europe (Crawley *et al.*, 2018), aiming for a better life away from the ravaging consequences of war. The aggravation of the Syrian conflict that year was the main driving force for the great migration flow towards neighboring and european countries. In fact, the civil war in Syria has been characterized as the largest refugee crisis of the last century due to its long duration and the number of displaced people, which is estimated to be more than 6.6 million refugees and 6.7 million internally displaced ones (UNHCR, 2022b). Unexpectedly, in 2015 the number of refugees worldwide reached the highest level since World War II (UN, 2016).

To such an extent, it is important to make a distinction between the different terms that are often used to refer to people that migrate. Since 2015, a great number of mixed groups have arrived in Europe, the majority of whom are refugees, in other terms people that “flee their countries in fear of persecution” (UNHCR, 2022c). Also, an important number of economic migrants, searching for better living conditions, arrive in Greece either legally or illegally (Archick & Margesson, 2019). The people who arrive in Greece through immigrants/refugee flows often request the right to be granted asylum and have legal protection (asylum seekers). For the purpose of this research, the terms refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants will be used almost interchangeably.

In this context, current research aims to acknowledge the prominence of migration as an important security issue that has the potential to destabilize states both internally and externally (Fouskas *et al.*, 2019). For this purpose, a more detailed analysis of the management of the migration crisis in Greece since 2015 is being presented. Firstly, a comparative analysis of the decisions adopted by the two different governments in response to migration flows during the last 5 years is being described. Secondly, the research highlights the decision-making and the initiatives taken by the Greek government in favor of migrants in the health and education sector. Finally, the current study concludes with a brief analysis focusing on the way migration crisis management questioned the European Union's ability and flexibility to respond effectively.

II. BALKAN AND MEDITERRANEAN ROUTES

Western Balkans play a vital role in the assimilation of these displaced people, as they form the primary route for their destination, which usually tends to be western European states. According to Clayton and Holland (2015), in 2015 more than one million refugees and migrants fled to western Europe through the Mediterranean. The Eastern Mediterranean Route, including passing through Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria to reach central and western Europe, comprised the main migration route (European Council, 2022). The vast majority of migrants following this route came from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (FRONTEX, 2021).

However, both Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean routes have long been linked with irregular migration, a phenomenon that peaked during the 2015 crisis and hindered, even more, the collective efforts of migration management (European Council, 2022). Having to tackle this enormous and unprecedented challenge, during the first months' border Balkan states reacted unilaterally trying to regulate to some extent the migration flows. For instance, Hungary's decision to close its borders with Croatia, increasing the burden for neighboring countries (BBC News, 2015), and the procrastination of European countries to reach a decision over distribution quotas resulted in huge difficulties for all Balkan states. Gradually, from the beginning of the crisis in March 2015, it became clear that states could not control such huge numbers of migration flows so they reacted either by restricting their intake policies or by requesting more external aid (UNHCR, 2016).

III. GREECE'S RESPONSE TO THE 2015 MIGRATION CRISIS

It's an indisputable fact that Greek society is a migrant host state as it has hosted an enormous number of migrants since 2015 due to a humanitarian emergency on the Greek islands. This happened mostly because Greece is at the heart of the Mediterranean route, so its position is accessible enough as we can see from the recent migration flows. For this reason, we can justify the immense migration flows that Greece has (Nestoras, 2015). 2015 is characterized by the most difficult emergency situations (Nestoras, 2015) as more than 851.000 migrants arrived or crossed Greece (UNHCR, 2016), provoking an enormous challenge both for the Greek authorities and the local population.

The period between 2015 and 2019 was definitely characterized as a time of crisis so there was an insurmountable need for national policymakers to follow specific strategies in order to find efficient solutions. Undeniably, in 2015 the number of migrants in Greece was very high and almost 80% of this migration inflow stayed in Greece while the rest 20% proceeded to other countries (Nestoras, 2015). In January 2015 until July 2019, the coalition of "Syriza"- "Anel" government, headed by Alexis Tsipras, President of the party "Syriza", with the party "Independent Greeks" (ANEL) followed an issue-linkage policy on migration issue (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021). "Syriza" was a Radical-Left Progressive and ANEL was a right-wing independent party. More specifically, this coalition of governments had a different mindset and strategy in general and they followed a different route compared with both pre-2015 and post-2019 national policies (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021). "Syriza" made it clear that it was a pro-immigration government.

Despite the fact that this government didn't greatly facilitate immigration, "Syriza" argued that "no migrant is illegal". It's crucial to mention that Syriza was one of the first political parties in Greece that were against the idea of "illegal migrants" (Nestoras, 2015). Furthermore, they encouraged the operation of hospitality centers and the family reunification, they discouraged "push-backs" at borders and they also abolished restrictions of the European Union on the travels of refugees. Furthermore, they tried to protect human rights in general (Katsiaficas, 2015). They also closed the detention centers that were opened by the previous governments, following a totally different migration policy from the previous political parties and governments (Nestoras, 2015). In addition to this, the government of Alexis Tsipras announced that it permits access in empty state buildings, vacant apartments and abandoned military camps although these places weren't functioning from the beginning. In this way refugees, migrants and asylum seekers had the ability to have the appropriate hospitality. According to Katsiaficas (2015), they also supported the protection of human rights, to a satisfactory degree. They generally wanted equality for all and they took

action for this purpose. It's important to note that SYRIZA-ANEL followed the rules of the European Union and detained asylum seekers in five islands: Lesbos, Chios, Leros, Samos and Kos (Skleparis, 2017).

In general, Greek policies prioritized the reception and documentation of migrants (Arvanitidis *et al.*, 2021) and the construction of necessary infrastructure for their temporary residency in the country. Greece faced a number of challenges as both the necessary financial resources and services were not decent enough to succeed in effective management of the crisis. Despite this, the more "open policy" followed by the Greek government and the implementation of new policies such as the "hotspot" approach, could not eventually overcome the structural deficiencies (Velentza, 2018). In fact, Greek authorities were criticized for their incapacity to coordinate governmental policies with local administration decisions, but also for the absence of common identification procedures (UNCHR, 2016) and the extreme reliance on the intervention of non-governmental organizations (Arvanitidis *et al.*, 2021). Difficulties emerged even in 2016 due to the EU-Turkey deal which aimed to deal with the reduction of illegal migration (Collett, 2016). Indeed refugee flows from Turkey were mitigated to some extent but Greece was forced to transform its role from a transit state to a state which could ensure refugees' integration (Skleparis, 2017). As a result, a great number of refugees remained on Greek islands either waiting for their asylum application to be accepted or because the limited financial resources could not ensure their safe return to Turkey (Velentza, 2018).

IV. ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CRISIS

Not only Greek authorities had to regulate the integration policies of the refugees, but the local community also came across an unprecedented situation. To a certain degree, greeks' attitudes towards refugees affected - and continues to affect to this day - the integration procedure. Yet, there seems to be a dual perspective towards migration that Greeks usually adopt. On the one hand, they tend to believe that migration doesn't contribute to a country's development while at the same time they are more prejudiced towards migrants that come from islamic countries. On the other hand, many recognize the government's efforts to ensure refugees' integration and they appear to show empathy and altruism towards refugees (Arvanitidis *et al.*, 2021). Greeks' concerns and suspicion are related to various factors, such as the limited financial resources for the assimilation of the refugees, the capacities of the local authorities to manage the inflows and the emergence of security and cultural issues (Dixon *et al.*, 2019).

In this context, media coverage of the crisis also played an important role in the way attitudes towards refugees were formed. In fact, a great variety of literature exists concerning the way the media presented migration inflows, depending on the number of migrants and the burden that each European country had to deal with. Over time, migration has been primarily presented as a negative effect with a lot of stereotypes and prejudices accompanying it (Arcila-Calderón *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, during the 2015 crisis, refugee flows were in many cases referred to as a threat to national security, while refugees were often described as "invaders". The designation of security issues was even more evident in countries that were not as affected by refugee inflows as others, such as the UK and Spain (Matar, 2017). Research conducted by the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) showed that:

Newspapers in Western Europe were generally more compassionate towards the plight of migrants and refugees, compared to Eastern European and Baltic countries which remained generally 'negative, unemotional and anti-EU' (EJO, 2015).

In Greece, the case was ambiguous. Many studies focus on the way the press covered the crisis, taking into consideration newspapers from different political contexts. A similar study that was conducted by Papadopoulou (2016) on behalf of the EJO for Greece, compared two newspapers with different political orientations. The more left-leaning one adopted a more humanitarian approach, emphasizing the difficulties refugees face, while the more conservative one had a less emotional attitude and focused mainly on the crisis as a phenomenon. In broad outline, other research also shows that a lot of newspapers referred often to the bad living conditions in hotspots and to the way the Greek government handled the refugee flows (Fotopoulos & Kaimaklioti, 2016).

V. GREECE'S RESPONSE TO CURRENT MIGRATION FLOWS

Greece still faces the enormous challenge of receiving and registering the uncontrollable inflows of migrants, who use it as a transit state to reach other European states. The government of New Democracy, elected in 2019, could be characterized as strict enough and definitely stricter than the previous governments (Hernández, 2020). It is known that the electoral campaign by Mr. Mitsotakis promised more effective border controls and "right" management of migration flows. In 2019, an immense number of migrants entered Greece, and reception centers were filled. 2019 was a very difficult year, because from the beginning of its term, the New Democracy government had to face a huge migration issue that plagued the Greek state. So, he had to face immense problems from the very beginning. Asylum procedures were

extremely slow and the government had to deal with many protests in the North Aegean in 2020 due to this urgent situation (Hernández, 2020). The New Democracy government focused on border controls and more specifically, the main purpose was the stricter control of national borders.

Another key thing to note is that the acceleration of asylum proceedings that PM Mitsotakis had promised, didn't take place. More specifically, the government of New Democracy didn't take serious measures to improve the slow and ineffective asylum procedures. For example, they didn't expand the staff of the Greek asylum service, although the asylum applications had increased. They had grown from just over 72,000 in September 2019 to more than 97,000 in February 2020 (Hernández, 2020).

Soon after the government's election, Mitsotakis attempted to move asylum seekers and refugees from Aegean Reception and Identification Centers (RIC's) that were jam-packed, to mainland Greece (Hernández, 2020). The situation was terrible and difficult to manage. Hotels that had the role of reception centers received awful threats and in the same period the arrivals by the sea were around 55,000 (Hernández, 2020). The reception centers were overcrowded and they didn't have the ability to host the new refugees and asylum seekers. There were many times that they hosted more refugees than they could (Hernández, 2020).

In order to address this, the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) program was created, which has the ability to host a satisfying number of migrants. The conservative New Democracy party created a new legislation according to which, migrants had the ability to acquire social security numbers (Hernández, 2020). It's worth mentioning that, according to the UNHCR (2020), from those benefitted by the ESTIA program, in June 2022 72% of children had access to schools, 66% had access to healthcare, 57% had a tax identification number, 23% registered with the unemployment agency and only 5% had a bank account. The issue of migrants became more tough in 2020, when Covid-19 arrived. The asylum service was closed for ten weeks, and at the same time tensions at the borders were inevitable (Hernández, 2020). The closure of the asylum centers created anxiety in the refugee community and an effective migration policymaking was necessary.

In general, the government of New Democracy helped migrants in specific sections. However, several structural issues were not addressed, and migration management became more difficult, due to the rising tensions with Turkey, and the instrumentalization of the migration issue by the Turkish government. As a general conclusion, Greece found difficulties to satisfy migration demands.

VI. POLICIES OF GREECE ON THE BASIC RIGHTS OF MIGRANTS - HEALTH

The rights of migrants to healthcare and education are linked with their integration into society and their right to live normal life. Thus, health and education policies cannot be missing from the overall crisis management strategy (Vozikis *et al.*, 2021). The Greek healthcare system for refugees has been dysfunctional and disorganized for many years (Kousoulis, 2016). In the sector of national insurance and social protection, migrants have the same rights as Greek citizens only if they have legal documents of residency in Greece, otherwise, they can only have access to medications and relevant services exclusively in emergency and life-threatening cases. Thus, on many occasions, they have no right to access health services (Vozikis & Sigano, 2015).

Equally important is that in the health sector there are also a lot of inequalities, especially when it is linked with the employment type (Galanis *et al.*, 2013). Before we examine the health policies implemented in Greece, it is crucial to mention that the most common issues facing the refugees are the lack of shelters, bad hygiene conditions, dehydration, nutrition disorders, mental health issues and sometimes very infectious diseases such as hepatitis B virus and Covid-19. Apart from that, some refugees suffer from infections such as asthma attacks (Kotsiou *et al.*, 2013). And it's worth mentioning that a wide range of psychological problems such as depression, arise. According to Article 33 of the National Law 4368/2016 asylum seekers are entitled to free access to healthcare systems. However, sometimes refugees face difficulties with the procedures required to obtain a social security number (AMKA) (Kotsiou *et al.*, 2013), which is obligatory for accessing healthcare services in Greece, except for emergencies (European Public Health Alliance, 2020). Furthermore, the decade-long recession and the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the capabilities of the Greek health system. Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for awareness campaigns to reach migrants effectively was difficult to meet. States should provide the necessary information about Covid-19, such as details about symptoms, preventions, control of spread, treatment, or psychological support, especially to vulnerable groups that include women, young girls, children, older people, and persons with disabilities (Fouskas *et al.*, 2021; European Public Health Alliance, 2022). In order to tackle epidemics, new procedures are needed, that are subject to a much-needed international health law since these crises are transnational (Batakis *et al.*, 2020).

VII. POLICIES OF GREECE ON THE BASIC RIGHTS OF MIGRANTS - EDUCATION

In 2015, migrants were facing an increased risk of social isolation. For that reason, the government tried to implement some fundamental educational policies for refugees. More specifically, in 2015 - when the number of refugees was enormous -, the government took some measures that were related to the education sector. These measures can be summarized in three legal settings. The first is Law no. 4415/2016 "Arrangements for Greek language education, intercultural education and other provisions". The second is the Joint Ministerial Decision no. 152360/CD4) "Establishment, organization, operation, coordination and reception facilities training program for the education of refugees, criteria and recruitment process" (OGG B - 3049/23.9.2016) and the third Ministerial Decision no. 131024/D1 "Settings on Educational Priority Zones - Establishment of Reception Classes - Reinforcing Coaching Classes and Reception Facilities for the education of refugees in school units" (OGG B - 2687/29.8.2016) (Palaologou *et al.*, 2018).

Minor children of asylum seekers and recognized refugees can have access to the educational system of the country, and have the same rights as Greek nationals (Greek Council for Refugees, 2022). For the enrollment of young refugees in greek schools, young refugees must have some required documents that include their "applicant for international card", their "asylum seeker's card" or valid residence permit. Also, according to the UNHCR (n.d.), it is necessary to have a health or vaccination booklet and proof of residence, such as the documents that Greek students are required to have. For these documents, parents have to communicate with the Director of the nearest school, in order to direct their children in the most appropriate school (Palaologou, 2018).

Directors of schools have the responsibility to offer refugees the necessary help and guidance in order to find the most appropriate choice for them and also assist them with the required documents. Sometimes, when displaced students don't have the necessary documentation they have access in Greek schools, under specific conditions. More specifically, in case they don't have the documents required they must be "protected by the Greek State as beneficiaries of international protection or under the protection of the "United Nations", according to No.21, par. 7,8 of Law 4251/2014 (80 AD). This applies to those who come from areas that have war or people who live under very unpleasant situations, are asylum seekers and lastly, they are third countries nationals living in Greece, even if their residence isn't yet legal. It's worth mentioning that these apply only in exceptional cases.

Furthermore, greek education is compulsory for both greek students and refugees. Compulsory education is one year of pre-primary school and after that primary and lower secondary education. According to the UNHCR (2020), in the sector of the recognition of foreign diplomas someone who is recognised as a refugee has the same treatment as a Greek national. If they face difficulties with the recognition of their certifications, they have the ability to address institutions such as the Department of Studies, Programs and Scholar Issues of the Ministry of Education for the recognition of titles of Primary and Secondary Education. Furthermore, Greek educational legislation does not separate the refugees according to the period of arrival. The basic criteria are the age of the refugee and the level of Greek knowledge (Palaologou *et al.*, 2018).

To conclude, the enrollment and the incorporation into the greek education system must be organized and planned well in order to assist young refugees to have a pleasant experience in greek school. Furthermore, the implementation of appropriate educational policies is vital for their integration in Greece or Europe in general.

VIII. EUROPE'S RESPONSE TO REFUGEE FLOWS

Refugee crisis management in 2015 was an enormous challenge for the European Union too, because of the unprecedented numbers of refugees and asylum seekers entering European countries but also due to other factors that hampered the adoption of a common policy. For instance, the impact of the great economic recession of 2010 (Trauner, 2016), the outbreak of terrorist attacks in many european cities and the emergence of nationalist and radical right parties complicated but also defined a great part of the way states responded to crisis (Park, 2015).

In fact, it was obvious that one of the EU's fundamental principles was being called into question during the migration flows. The principle of free movement and the abolition of internal border barriers within the context of the Schengen Area was partially implemented while frequently being violated by various states (Antenore, 2016). Similarly, the Dublin Regulation, signed in 1990, which states that the country of first entry is responsible for processing asylum seekers' applications, has not been properly implemented. In fact, while the EU has made efforts towards the establishment of a common framework concerning migration and asylum policies (Trauner, 2016), it is argued that the necessary convergence between states has not yet been established (Scipioni, 2017).

In practice, the Dublin Regulation revealed serious weaknesses as it surcharged mainly the EU border states, such as Greece, Italy and Hungary, with the obligation to regulate the majority of the asylum

applications, as they served as transient states to enter Europe (Park, 2015). The incapability, both financial and structural, of many entry states to handle the migration inflows led to the selective implementation of the Dublin Regulation and eventually to the expulsion of migrants and refugees to other European countries (Greenhill, 2016).

In fact, the commitment for solidarity and joint efforts were also questioned as many states acted unilaterally even from the early beginning of the crisis while the EU failed to implement an inflow distribution promptly. Front-line states and Germany comprised the main actors during the first months of the crisis. In contrast, western European countries like the UK, Portugal and Spain weren't affected in the same way (Trauner, 2016). More particularly, while Germany initially adopted a more open migration policy accepting more than 100000 migrants only in August 2015 (Eddy, 2015), gradually readjusted her intake policies with other countries, leading Austria and then Sweden, for example, to impose further restrictions. Indeed, during the second half of 2015 migration policies seemed to consist more like efforts of buck passing the burden of migration integration to others (Scipioni, 2017).

Problems were also raised in Balkan area. The EU in order to support front-line states adopted an "emergency relocation scheme" encouraging mainly Hungary, Greece and Italy to host migrants through funding assistance. However, Hungary opposed european policies raising a fence along its borders with Serbia and Croatia (Trauner, 2016) while at the same time other eastern states such as the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia refused to comply with EU's guideline concerning the proposed 'fairness mechanism' which aimed to establish a reallocation policy (Buonanno, 2022). In general, the compliance of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) was highly impeded by the independent policies followed by the European states, which often consisted of different approaches that were applied during the asylum determination process (Buonanno 2022). Indeed, in September 2015, 40 violations of the common european asylum policy by states, were detected by the European Commission (Carrera & den Hertog, 2019).

Moreover, it is true that the EU emphasized in the importance of national security and border preservation mobilizing and increasing the budget of FRONTEX which later was upgraded to the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG) while it also established the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA) to ensure the right implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). However, the intergovernmental structure of these mechanisms raises questions about their efficiency, as many states seemed unwilling to offer personnel (Scipioni, 2017).

In general, the effectiveness of the EU's approach during the migration crisis in 2015 has always been a controversial issue. Many human rights organizations questioned the description of the phenomenon as a "crisis" and accused EU leaders of trying to make a profit by the dramatization of the situation. In fact, the migration flows gave prominence to a number of security issues concerning national security, humanitarian needs and financial crisis while it disconcerted to some extent the power and the structure of the European institution (Ginty *et al.*, 2021).

IX. CONCLUSION

It is apparent that due to constant changes in the international system and because of the aggravation of inter-state conflicts, migration and refugee flows will continue to constitute an important and urgent issue to deal with. Under this complex framework, states are requested to implement the necessary policies in order to ensure migrants' rights from the one side, but also to maintain internal stability on the other. As it has been previously analyzed, Greece's example makes clear the fact that financial resources but also flexible and coordinated policies are essential to address the urgency of migration flows effectively. However, a lot more factors also play an important role in migration crisis management, such as the number of refugees and migrants a country accepts and the duration of a migration crisis. In this case, interstate cooperation and collective decision making is indispensable but also useful so that the burden of migration integration can be divided in different states. Moreover, the effective and transparent participation of NGOs is vital, since NGOs have become one of the main institutions in global health governance (Sidiropoulos *et al.*, 2021). The EU until today has not adopted a collective and coordinated migration policy, while it is obvious that member states prefer to follow unilateral decisions; a fact that downgrades EU's legitimacy and fundamental values.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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