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Socio-political impact and the ground realities of refugee policies in Greece

Suror Shaba Polus¹

The National University of Malaysia

Mohd Ikbal Mohd Huda^{2,*}

The National University of Malaysia

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 2.1. Research design. 2.2. Document analysis. 2.3. Regional studies. 2.4. Media and public opinion analysis. 2.5. Thematic analysis. 3. Historical context and background. 4. Legal framework and policy measures. 5. Socio-Political dynamics. 6. Challenges and criticisms. 7. Insights from different areas in Greece. 8. Policy recommendations. 9. Conclusion. 10. References.

Abstract: This research paper will address the Greece policy regarding refugees, specifically after the European refugee crisis in 2015, when Greece turned into one of the main gates of entry of refugees leaving the conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The paper explores the socio-political, legal and humanitarian frames that defined the Greek approach to the crisis. It discusses the issue that Greece had to deal with as a frontline state such as overcrowded reception centers, delay in processing asylum and insufficient integration programs. Referring to the data of the institutions like the Greek Council of Refugees, the academic research, and case studies of the different parts of Greece, the article offers a thorough analysis of the policy responses in the country. The study uses documentary analysis, qualitative interviews, and case reports in making an evaluation of the effectiveness of these

¹ Centre For Research in History, Politics and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, *The National University of Malaysia*.

² The National University of Malaysia (UKM). E-mail: surorshaba11@hotmail.com. (corresponding author).

policies. Results show that the asylum system in Greece has not performed well during the crisis, but it is not as simple as it is presented since there are tremendous differences in the experience of refugees across the region. The article states that a proper policy change is necessary, and there should be European Union (EU) wide unity and long-term plans on how to better manage refugees. It requires the multifaceted approach balancing humanitarian issues with practical issues at the ground level. The paper summarizes that to find sustainable solutions to the population of refugees in Greece, more effort has to be put by the EU, which means that policy change, solidarity, and long-term intervention is necessary to assist refugees and host communities in the most appropriate way.

Keywords: Greece's Refugee Policies, European Refugee Crisis, Historical Context, Legal Frameworks, Socio-Political Dynamics.

1. Introduction

Since the height of the European refugee crisis in 2015, Greece has become a strategic center of entry of migrants who are planning to seek refuge in Europe. Located on the south east border of the European Union (EU), Greece is strategically located to serve as a point of entry or exit to conflict, persecution, and economic instability especially of states like Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq³. This large number of refugees put pressure on the resources and the infrastructure of Greece which was already a weak country due to a ten years long period of financial crisis that resulted to austerity policies, high unemployment, and insufficiently funded state services.

The influx of refugees exerted a lot of stress on Greece, its asylum system, and reception facilities. Reception centers, like Moria on Lesbos, were originally intended to host a small number of thousands of people but occasionally had tens of thousands, causing congestion, poor hygiene and health care access. Greece was also a passage country to other richer EU countries as regarded by many refugees. EU border policies, however, with the Dublin Regulation, which obliges refugees to seek asylum in the EU country that they first enter, shifted the burden on Greece of having to process such claims. This regulatory structure posed bottlenecks in the asylum procedure, which added to the delays and long-term accommodation in a poor state^{4,5}.

Greece responded to these problems by adopting various policy options, such as creation of Closed Controlled Access Centres (instead of open camps) to enhance security, which has been criticised due to the fact that they limit freedom of movement of the refugees. In an effort to cope with the inflow, other steps like prioritizing asylum claims and intensifying border security have been implemented but have been criticized due to their effect on due process, and there are claims of pushbacks⁶.

The politics and Greek society were also affected significantly by the refugee crisis. Most of the Greek communities and non-governmental organizations took the

³ AFOUXENIDIS, A., M. PETROU, G. KANDYLIS, A. TRAMOUNTANIS, et al. Dealing with a humanitarian crisis: Refugees on the eastern EU border of the island of Lesbos. *Journal of Applied Security Research*, 2017, 12(1), 7-39.

⁴ JOSIPOVIĆ, D. 1.1. Geopolitics and Migration: Migration Industry as an Important Factor of (de) stabilization of Europe and the Middle East. *Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade* | 2017, 2017, 3.

⁵ MAANI, L. Refugees in the European Union: the harsh reality of the Dublin Regulation. *Notre Dame J. Int'l Comp. L.*, 2018, 8, 83.

⁶ PAPALEONIDOPOULOS, G. Social justice and social work with asylum seekers and refugees in times of crisis: Voices from the front line. *University of Essex*, 2023.

side of refugees, but at the same time, the far-right groups exploited the anti-migrant spirit, making the refugees look like national security and culture adversaries. Such political polarization, along with the increased tension of the role of EU in burden-sharing, resulted in discussions of refugee policies of Greece and the necessity of more cooperation between nations⁷.

This article is a critical assessment of the current changing policies of Greece with regard to the legal, social and political aspects that have influenced how Greece has responded to refugees. It discusses the issue of overpopulated camps, lengthy asylum processes, and the problems of integration of refugees. The paper further compares the position of Greece in the EU migration policies, the role of non-government organizations (NGOs), and international agencies like Frontex, and the discussion of the impact of the existing policy on European migration governance. The article, using case studies such as the 2020 Moria fire, the effect of COVID-19 on refugee populations, and the resilience of local and international actors in responding to the crisis, emphasizes the failures of the system and the strengths demonstrated by local and international actors in responding to the crisis.

It also provides policy recommendations in the paper insisting on more sustainable and human approach to the management of refugees. It demands a fairer sharing of the responsibility in EU and promotes reforms that would balance the security issues with the safeguarding of the human rights. This article can be discussed as an addition to the current discussion on the topic of the migration control and as a set of challenges to which migrants in Greece are exposed to. An examination of the legal frameworks of the asylum policies and its barriers to accessing them by refugees allows making a statement that it is essential to develop policies on the national and EU levels to address the challenges related to migration governance.

2. Methodology

The paper will be multi-methodological in examining the changing refugee policies in Greece, especially after the European refugee crisis of 2015. Document analysis and regional case studies approach have been combined in the methodology to give a thorough picture of legal, socio-political, and humanitarian forces that have determined refugee management in Greece.

2.1. Research design

The study adheres to the descriptive and exploratory approach, focusing on the historical, legal, and socio-political aspects that have shaped the policies of Greece on refugees. The paper relies on secondary data and the primary sources, analyzing the development of Greece policies, the regional case studies and social-political reaction to the refugee crisis.

2.2. Document analysis

The main method of data collection is the systematic review of the academic papers, policy papers, government and non-governmental organization reports, and documents of the international organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This discussion follows the evolution of refugee policies in Greece, including the development of the laws that regulate the issue including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Dublin Regulation, in order to

⁷ CABOT, H. *On the doorstep of Europe: Asylum and citizenship in Greece*. Edition ed.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. ISBN 1512825220. Available at: <https://www.pennpress.org/9780812246155/on-the-doorstep-of-europe/> (accessed on 19th May 2025).

determine the responsibility of Greece in accordance with international and EU law⁸. By reviewing these documents, the study aims to provide a chronological overview of policy shifts and institutional responses to refugee management.

2.3. Regional studies

The paper also examines how the policy of refugees affects particular areas of Greece, such as the islands of Lesbos, Chios, and Samos or the mainland cities, such as Athens and Thessaloniki. The areas targeted in specialized case studies are diverse experiences of refugees, including overcrowded reception centers and community-based integration projects in small towns. Such case studies are based on reports provided by humanitarian organizations and on-site visits of the same, providing an insight into how refugee policies are implemented locally and what difficulties are faced in the various regions of application.

2.4. Media and public opinion analysis

The coverage of the Greece refugee crisis by the media is an essential part of this research. This comparison follows the changes in the general attitude and political rhetoric towards refugees, especially against the backdrop of the emerging popularity of far-right trends and alterations in government policy. The study evaluates the role played by media in influencing the perception of the population and the decisions made by the policy makers by analyzing the manner in which the media handled the crisis.

2.5. Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis identifies common themes and patterns in all the various data sources with emphasis on such issues as congestion in the reception centers, asylum processing delays, integration issues, and polarization. The approach would give a holistic view of the systemic issues of the refugee management system in Greece, and this would offer insights to the issues that recur routinely among the refugees and the institutions that accommodate them.

3. Historical context and background

The modern history of the migration in Greece has its roots way before the crisis period itself and the significant events surrounding the mass exodus have had a significant impact on policy approach in terms of dealing with refugees. In the modern Greek history, one of the large migrations was the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922. This incidence witnessed the exodus of about 1.5 million of the Greek Orthodox Christian residing in Turkey to Greece following the Greco-Turkish war. This migration of the ethnic Greeks into an already struggling home country had severe effects on the terrain of the demography, social and economics of the country. The problem of displacement in Greece was once more during the World War II when the mass migrations within and outside the country were caused due to Nazi occupation. During the post war years, the country had received large figures of the Greek repatriates not only in the Soviet Union but also in Albania and in other nations where the Greeks had been living as minorities. These historical migration waves had an impact on the legal and administrative systems of Greece in dealing with the refugees. This was followed by yet another wave of migrants, most of whom were Albanians, into Greece after the fall of communism in Europe in the late 80s and early nineties. Estimates are that over half a million Albanian

⁸ KANELIS, G. Refugee Protection in Greece: Compliance Challenges and Legal Obligations Under European and International Law. Available at SSRN, 2025.

migrants lived and worked in Greece by the late 1990s, including many seasonal workers. Many of these migrants eventually regularised their status under subsequent legalisation programmes (notably in 1998, 2001, and 2005)⁹.

But the crisis experienced in 2015 was the first time the refugee problem has reached such massive proportions and levels of complexity. The high numbers of people crossing into Greece out of Turkey put the country at the center of the European reaction towards the crisis. This made Greece the guinea pig of a slew of EU policies meant to control the influx including the contentious EU-Turkey deal. This agreement was to repatriate refugees back to Turkey to provide them with money and assurances of resettlement of Syrian refugees to Europe. Although the deal reduced the inflow of people arriving in Greece, tens of thousands were left to stay in overcrowded camps in Greece, not able to continue with their asylum requests and even to come back home. This condition combined with the finance crisis of Greece resulted in an unstable situation where the policies of the refugees were consistently changing due to internally instigated as well as externally imposed forces.

Statistics provided by the UNHCR indicate that the crisis has not stopped yet, and in 2024, 62,119 people came there, the most significant figure since 74,613 immigrants arrived there in 2019. Although these figures are a great decrease of the high of 861 630 arrivals in 2015, it indicates that Greece continues to be a highly favoured point of entry to an individual seeking refuge in Europe. More than 10,000 asylum seekers and refugees have landed in Greece as of April 20, 2025. The recent arrivals of 9,324 were mostly by sea, 1,003 being by overland route. Although Greece has been known to accommodate the displaced population in large numbers, the extent of the current disaster has revealed major flaws in the legal, political, and social frameworks¹⁰.

4. Legal framework and policy measures

The legal commitments of Greece towards protecting refugees are anchored on various international treaties, EU policies and domestic laws. The 1951 Convention on the Refugee and the 1967 Protocol offer the basis of the international system of protection of refugees and is one of the pillars of this framework. Such agreements stipulate the status that qualifies one as a refugee as well as the rights of refugees such as the principle of non-refoulement which ensures that no one is returned to countries where he or she may be persecuted. Greece's membership of the European Union further complicates its legal obligations. The EU's Common European Asylum System (CEAS) requires member states to adhere to a standardised process for handling asylum claims. Under CEAS, Greece must follow specific procedures related to asylum seekers' registration, processing, and integration. The Dublin Regulation stipulates that refugees must apply for asylum in the first EU country they enter. It has significantly impacted Greece, as it places a disproportionate burden on countries that serve as entry points into the EU¹¹.

Greece has been forced by sheer numbers of refugees flocking its banks to find it hard to meet its commitments as supported by these legal structures despite their support and stipulated laws. Asylum service, which was founded in 2013, in Greek has undergone considerable pressures processing the claims of asylum within a reasonable period. In an asylum seeker, there are frequent long waiting times to

⁹ ALLEN, J., J. BARLOW, J. LEAL, T. MALOUTAS, et al. *Housing and welfare in Southern Europe*. Edition ed.: Wiley Online Library, 2004.

¹⁰ GOODWIN-GILL, G. S. The office of the united nations high commissioner for refugees and the sources of international refugee law. *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, 2020, 69(1), 1-41.

¹¹ PENDAKIS, K. L. Migrant advocacy under austerity: transforming solidarity in the Greek-refugee regime. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2021, 34(2), 1516-1539.

be given decisions, and in the process, there are extensive waiting times in overcrowded camps with little access to even fundamental services. The poor standards within the asylum system have been worsened by the poor facility within the reception centres within Greece especially in the Aegean islands. The Last Home camp in Lesbos turned into a catchphrase that demonstrates the lack of efficiency of the European figures of the policy on refugees. Moria had the capacity to hold an approximate of 3,000 individuals but housing more than 20,000 refugees at its peak, caused extreme overcrowding resulting in sanitation issues as well as frequent eruption of violence. In 2020, a sudden fire burned down the camp and displaced thousands of refugees leading to the need of the Greek government to reconsider their system in relation to refugees management¹².

Growing challenges have prompted the Greek government to implement a number of policy strategies to enhance the asylum process in the country and assist in integrating refugees. An instance in point is the Hellenic Integration Support of Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS) program that aims at housing the recognised refugees, conducting language courses and overseeing job prospects. Although to some extent this program was effective in assimilating refugees to the Greek society, criticism has been launched against it pointing to its lack of funds and resources to counter the magnitude of the crisis. Since it is the flagship of integration in Greece, HELIOS provides education, employment training, and subsidies on rental to migrants in Greece. Since June 2019, 44,852 individuals have already obtained employability and language training and nearly 10,000 households have gained assessment of rent. Without an overall funding source, its initial management was under International Organization of Migration (IOM) but under the EU funding its management is now under Ministry of Migration and Asylum, Greece with further assistance of the European Social Fund.

A new strand of EU funding of 1 billion euros has been disbursed through the Home Affairs Fund (2021-2027). This European Commission financial support aims to strengthen border surveillance and control for both mainland Greece and the Aegean islands. In 2023, the EU and Greece, with Frontex playing a key role, agreed upon a new action plan to improve returns. So far, the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme has proven to be particularly effective in facilitating the safe return of non-EU nationals to their countries of origin. The EU continues to support asylum seekers and refugees' voluntary relocation from Greece to other Member States and Schengen-associated countries. From April 2020 until March 2023, over 5,000 vulnerable migrants, including 1,367 unaccompanied minors, availed of the programme and were successfully relocated to another country.

Greece has significantly improved the first point reception centres with EU funding of 276 million euros, including the Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centres on the Greek islands used for initial assessments of migrants. Reception capacity and living conditions have improved, and by the end of 2023, Lesbos, Samos, Leros, Kos, and Chios had new and upgraded facilities with 12,000 new places available for those being processed through the national reception system. These centres feature enhanced safety measures for residents and staff and improved and upgraded sanitation facilities, including biological wastewater treatment and accommodations more suitable for harsher weather in winter. Recreational spaces were added to the centres, including computer labs, sports courts, leisure areas, and enhanced canteens, kitchens, and laundry facilities. Similarly, on the mainland, improvements have been made to facilities such as

¹² ARBACI, S. *Paradoxes of segregation: Housing systems, welfare regimes and ethnic residential change in Southern European cities*. Edition ed.: John Wiley & Sons, 2019. ISBN 1444338331. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118867365>

Diavata, Malakasa, and Fylakio to help ensure the dignified treatment of asylum seekers¹³.

Since the UNHCR introduced the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation program in November 2015, it has provided over 27,000 urban housing places for vulnerable asylum seekers. Meanwhile, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund's. All Children in Education programme is helping migrant children transition into Greek schools, and as of mid-2023, 12,230 children have enrolled in the initiative. Targeted interventions in recent years have resulted in a significant decrease from approximately 5,000 to 1,800 of unaccompanied migrant children (UMCs) arriving into the Greek system. The Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF) has provided 53.4 million euros to help Greece operate specialised UMC shelters for up to 2,000 young people on the mainland.

Also working to protect UMCs in precarious situations, the National Emergency Response Mechanism ensures rapid registration and safe accommodation while, supported by the IOM and the EU, the MERIMNA project strengthens child protection at border points and reception centres. AMIF funding from the EU, in collaboration with UNHCR and IOM, provides primary healthcare, mental health support, and emergency medical services for migrants hosted in Greek reception centres. The Emergency Health Response programme has mobile and modular clinics that they deploy to improve healthcare access for migrants.

Because of a massive burden on Greece at the frontline of the European migrant crisis, it has been incumbent on the EU to provide comprehensive support to strengthen Greece's capacity to manage migration while improving conditions for asylum seekers and refugees. However, many challenges remain, particularly regarding ensuring long-term integration and addressing systemic bottlenecks in asylum processing. Continued cooperation between Greece, various EU agencies, and international organisations will be necessary to sustain progress and protect some of the most vulnerable people in the world. However, Greece's reliance on EU funding and international aid has limited its ability to develop a sustainable and self-sufficient refugee management system. The dependence on external support, coupled with the bureaucratic inefficiencies within the asylum system, has led to growing dissatisfaction among many refugees, NGOs, and human rights groups¹⁴.

5. Socio-Political dynamics

Mass movement of refugees in Greece has also influenced socio-political situation in the country greatly. Ridiculously divided over responding to the crisis, has significantly affected the Greek community as the general mood swings towards sympathy towards the condition of refugees and apprehension of the social, economic, and security consequences of residing in their nation. On the one hand, several local communities especially those of the islands of Lesbos, Chios, and Samos have shown great solidarity towards refugees. Volunteers, NGOs and individuals have contributed valuable services including food, clothes and even legal aids mostly being complementary to where the state has failed to serve in terms of provision. Such acts of solidarity have served in relieving certain urgent humanitarian demands of refugees and have served in the positive relations among refugees and the respective populations.

Nevertheless, the length of the crisis, coupled with the economic challenges which have been experienced by Greece in the past several years have caused bitterness among some quarters of the population. Most Greeks believe that the

¹³ POLUS, S. S. AND M. I. MOHD HUDA German Integration Model for Refugees: Processes and Perspectives. *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategy*, 2024, 51(4).

¹⁴ Ibid.

nation is unable to sustain such masses of refugees, especially as it is overly exploiting the state services, as well as infrastructure. This has given rise to anti-immigrants, and pro-far-right political parties government such as the currently outlawed Golden Dawn that have played the role of exploiting the population on its insecurities in security, employment, and even cultural belonging¹⁵.

The media has incriminated itself in forming the perception of people towards the refugee crisis. Even as other outlets have given prominence to the humanitarian elements of the crisis and the need to emphasise the plight of refugees and the importance of solidarity measures internationally, others have dwelt upon the perceived threats of the refugees, in this regard crime, terrorism, and social cohesion. Such polarised media environment has helped stoke divided popular opinion on the matter and has shaped political discourses on policies that deal with refugees. On the political scale, the reaction of Greece towards the problem of refugees has been characterized by the contradictions between various groups of individuals inside the government. On the one hand, there have been some political leaders who have suggested that there are more humanitarian strategies to pursue and on the other hand there are political leaders who have insisted on tightening of the borders and imposing heightened security initiatives. Such internal divisions have predisposed the delivery of policies as inconsistent and have eroded the efforts on the formation of a deficient and effective response to the crisis⁸. Centre-right Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had lost the loyalty of the electorate and, in March 2025, had to redesign his government repeating Makis Vouridis, a far-right politician as the migration minister as he strives to stop the electoral flow to Right-wing populist party, Greek Solution¹⁶.

International organisations and NGOs have played a crucial role in mitigating the worst effects of the crisis, providing essential services such as healthcare, education, and legal aid to refugees. However, the reliance on NGOs and international aid has highlighted the inadequacies of state-sponsored refugee programs and the need for more robust governmental intervention.

6. Challenges and criticisms

Greece and its international allies have tried to resolve the problem, the nation has been experiencing a lot of difficulties in the management of the refugee crisis. The first issue that is most pressing is the overcrowding in reception centres. The Moria camp on Lesbos that was intended to accommodate 3,000 individuals was at one time crowded with more than 20,000 refugees. The situation at the camp has worsened very fast and poor sanitation, lack of access to healthcare services and frequent eruption of violence have become common in the camp. The camp would become a representation of the overall collapse of Europe in its refugee policy, which would later result in a fire in 2020 destroying the camp and leaving thousands of refugees without housing. The Greek asylum has also gained much criticism of being ineffective. It is also common that refugees have to wait long before their applications are attended to, as long as years. In the process, they are obliged to live under poor conditions and cannot work and fit in the Greek society. The uncertainty and absence of opportunities cause mental health problems and

¹⁵ KOOPMANS, R. AND P. STATHAM *Challenging immigration and ethnic relations politics: Comparative European perspectives*. Edition ed.: Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 0198295618. <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/publications/challenging-immigration-and-ethnic-relations-politics-comparative> (accessed on 25th May 2025).

¹⁶ BAKHSHANDEH, E. AND Y. YEGANEH Geopolitical transformation in eastern mediterranean; restructuring role of greece and the impact of abraham accord. *International Studies*, 2023, 60(2), 231-249.

isolation, which only makes their process of re-establishing their lives more complicated.

Also, there are still poor integration policies. Although programs such as the HELIOS may be of some assistance to known refugees, they are not endless and, in most cases, fail to meet the needs of the refugees in the long term. Employment and education coupled with housing still poses a big challenge to successful integration. Most refugees can find themselves in the informal settlements or in the congested cities and towns, without access to the social services they require to survive in their new world. The human rights groups have also taken up the issue of how Greece treats refugees especially in the form of pushbacks on its borders. These pushbacks have involved forceful deportation of refugees to Turkey without being afforded an opportunity to seek asylum which is against international law and this has elicited a lot of criticism. The Greek government has refuted these accusations yet NGOs and other international bodies reports indicate that the practices occurred¹⁷.

Besides, the dependence of Greece on the EU funding and international support highlights the importance of a more sustainable model of the refugee crisis. The existing system, which is highly relying on outside assistance, is unable to cover the demands of the rising number of refugees. Ongoing crisis has necessitated urgent reforms that would not only focus on the immediate humanitarian issues but also the long-term integration issues affecting refugees in Greece.

Being one of the leading countries in the European refugee crisis, Greece has gone through the most difficult times trying to offer sufficient assistance to refugees. The situation can be illuminated based on academic research conducted by organisations such as the Greek Council of refugees and numerous universities. Recently, the Greek Council for Refugees (2023) evaluated how well the basic needs of refugees in Greece were covered. It identified the lapses in the provision of shelter as most refugees reside in congested camps which do not have proper sanitation and security. Another issue has been food security. Balafouti et al. covered the issue of food assistance programmes among refugees in Greece and the need to embrace community-based solutions to facilitate nutritious meals and overcome dietary diversity¹⁸.

7. Insights from different areas in Greece

Since 2015, the country of Greece has been the centre of the European refugee movements, especially after the refugee crisis had to reach record-high levels. Greece has registered numerous refugee movements in the past, with the latest events occurring after the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922 and after the World War II. Nevertheless, the size and character of the present refugee crisis which is mostly brought about by the Syrian civil war and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have placed untold burdens on the country especially considering it is facing financial hardships¹⁹. Consequently, Greece has been forced to deal with arrival of refugees when its economy was already in shambles.

The 2015 crisis was the peak of the number of refugees received, as in that very year more than 1 million refugees arrived in Greece. The majority of refugees were exiting Syria, but those who had moved to other countries in large numbers are the leaders of Afghanistan and Iraq. In March 2016, EU-Turkey agreement was

¹⁷ POLUS, Jebat, 2024.

¹⁸ BALAFOUTI, T., D. E. STRONGYLOU, V. SVOLOS, M. ARGYROPOULOU, et al. Addressing Childhood Obesity in Children in Need in Greece: Policy Implementers' Knowledge, Perceptions and Lessons for Effective Implementation. *Nutrients*, 2025, 17(16), 2629.

¹⁹ PAPAGEORGAKI, K. A. The current refugee crisis: lessons from the past and ways or policies to confront them, according to the European Union framework 2022.

an attempt to resolve the crisis where the irregular migration pathways across Greece would be stopped. The agreement was that refugees coming to Turkey without seeking asylum or whose asylum was denied would be sent back to Turkey and EU would resettle Turkey Syrian refugees in its member countries²⁰. Nevertheless, even with this agreement, there was still flow of refugees and Greece, having very little resources, ended up in the middle of the crisis.

Lesbos, which is only a few miles off the Turkish coast, has become a methodical and real-life entry point to Europe by refugees. The island has been one of the biggest points of entry of the sea refugees. Moria is the most recognizable refugee camp in Lesbos, which has turned into a symbol of the inability of this country to deal with the situation of migrants. Moria was initially meant to house 3,000 residents but had a phenomenal population of more than 20,000 at its peak leading to very heavy congestion and shortage of basic amenities²¹. Poor sanitation, lack of medical care, food and shelter were some of the conditions in the camp, which caused a terrible humanitarian crisis. This was only aggravated by a fire that gutted a large part of the camp in September 2020 leaving thousands of refugees homeless with no proper shelter²². This catastrophic event also explained the fact that there was an urgent necessity to make necessary structural changes to the refugee management system in the country, especially in relation to infrastructure and humanitarian assistance.

Although the islands have to experience the direct impact of the refugee flows, cities such as Athens also have quite a number of difficulties. Unlike the overpopulated reception centers in the reversed side of the islands, the refugees in Athens are frequently faced by the problems of housing, employment, and acceptance of the Greek society. The housing facilities have not been able to keep with the hasty population and most refugees are in the informal settlements, deserted structures or crowded apartments where the sanitation, medical services and education are not easily accessible²³. The support services offered to refugees in Athens have been heavily dependent on the role played by the NGOs. Such services as legal assistance, educational courses, professional training, and psychological assistance provided by NGOs are essential in terms of assisting refugees to overcome the challenges of their new lives in Greece.

However the economic situation of the Greek government, which is subject to financial limitation due to the current economic crisis in the country has hampered the ability to increase these services and make sure that refugees are fully integrated in the workforce and the communities²⁴. This has contributed to a partial integration process where some of the refugees have been employed and have been socially accepted and others have been excluded and live under precarious circumstances.

Unlike the city struggles in Athens, the island of Crete has come up with a more community-oriented approach to integration of refugees. It was defined by the active involvement of the local population at the center of which refugees are opened by society and offered long-term assistance in order to become a part of society. Local programs such as language courses, professional training, cultural exchange programs are designed to establish mutual understanding between the local population and the refugees²⁵. The long-term vision of integration programs of

²⁰ KOOPMANS, Challenging immigration and ethnic relations politics, 2000.

²¹ Ibid.

²² COFFEY, A. E. Heated housing politics: climate displacement & struggles for shelter in a wildfire-affected region. 2024.

²³ KOOPMANS, Challenging immigration and ethnic relations politics, 2000.

²⁴ POLUS, Jebat, 2024.

²⁵ KOOPMANS, Challenging immigration and ethnic relations politics, 2000.

Crete is not only to help refugees in the short run, but also to provide them with the means to become productive citizens as they are able to provide themselves.

The approach by Crete emphasizes the role of the local involvement in the integration process. Including residents in the process of assimilating refugees, the island has created a feeling of unity and minimized the tension between the local people and refugees. This community-based integration model can be used as a sustainable model in other parts of Greece and it will prove that local projects can be central in establishing social cohesion and long-term integration²⁶.

Thessaloniki, the second-largest city in Greece has established a sound system of assistance to the refugees and it has been based on the close cooperation of the local government, the NGOs, and international agencies. The strategic position of the city with regard to geographical location has seen it become a strategic refugee settlement point and subsequent movement. Thessaloniki has introduced a large number of programs that can meet the immediate needs of refugees, such as shelter, legal aid, medical services, education, and mental help to traumatized refugees²⁷. The strength of the approach of Thessaloniki is in the process of coordination of different stakeholders. The local government, NGOs and the international agencies operate synergistically in order to see the refugees have the services they require to reconstruct their lives. The experience of Thessaloniki shows the value of collaboration on all governmental and civil society levels to keep the flow of refugees under control and provide integration²⁸.

In less populated cities such as Kavala in northern Greece, smaller cities have demonstrated that integration of refugees can be effective in the less populated areas. Kavala is a smaller organization, but it has designed effective programs to take care of refugees via temporary houses, language classes, and job opportunities. Kavala has had a central role in building trust and cooperation with refugees and providing a friendly atmosphere to them in search of safety and permanence²⁹. These initiatives have proven that small communities can work hard in promoting nationwide refugee policies, particularly when the locals are enthusiastic about the procedure.

The multicultural nature of the experiences of regions in Greece highlights the difficulty of overseeing the mass movement of refugees. Since the conditions of the overcrowded Lesbos to the community-led integration in Crete, Thessaloniki, and Kavala, every region has come up with its own response to the situation depending on the local factors. The examples of Athens and Thessaloniki point to the difficulties that urban centers experience in accommodating refugees, whereas Crete and Kavala provide the examples of how the smaller communities can successfully accommodate refugees based on local involvement and long-term planning. These regional case studies explain why refugee management strategies should be designed accordingly to meet the needs and capabilities of particular territories and that solutions to refugees' integration must also be flexible and contextually sensitive to guarantee effective integration of refugees throughout Greece.

8. Policy recommendations

Although Greece has achieved certain steps towards controlling the refugee crisis, much more changes are required to fix possible deficiencies of the existing system. The delaying process of asylum is the most urgent. Asylum applications are

²⁶ POLUS, Jebat, 2024.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ PAPADOPOULOU, C.-I., S. KALOGIANNIDIS, D. KALFAS, G. KONTEOS, et al. Civil Protection in Greece's Cities and Regions: Multi-Hazard Performance, Systemic Gaps, and a Roadmap to Integrated Urban Resilience. *Urban Science*, 2025, 9(9), 362.

²⁹ KOOPMANS, Challenging immigration and ethnic relations politics, 2000.

processed by the Greek Asylum Service which was formed in 2013 and it has failed to handle the numbers. The application of refugees takes a long process which in some cases takes months or even years to be approved. This is the delay that adds to the uncertainty and stress of the refugees some of which are currently in camps that are congested and under-resourced. The process of asylum needs to be simplified and it can be done through adding more personnel to attend to asylum applications, enhancing training of people involved in the process and adopting digital solutions to facilitate the process.

The other important area of reform is the living conditions in refugee camps. Much of the overcrowding was in many of the reception centres, especially on the Aegean islands, which did not have basic amenities like proper sanitation, medical care, and educational facilities. The example of the Moria camp on Lesbos was often criticised due to its subpar living conditions, its overcrowding being the cause of diseases spreading and mental health of its inhabitants getting worse as well³⁰. The fact that Moria was destroyed in 2020 is a stark warning of how badly it is necessary to restructure the infrastructure of refugee camps. Though it has been improving, the Greek government with the collaboration of international organisations needs to invest on the construction and maintenance of camps where refugees can have dignified living conditions. This involves taking care of the overcrowding in the camps and the provision of the necessary facilities in the camps like clean water, food, healthcare and education.

The integration programmes which are long term are very important in making sure that the refugees are able to restore their lives in Greece. Although the immediate reaction to the refugee crisis was putting out the fire, the concentration should now be on long-term solutions that will assist the refugees to fit in the Greek society. The HELIOS programme is a significant move towards this direction though it should be extended to accommodate the increasing demand of such services³¹. They must be integrated in comprehensive programs that entail language training, vocational, job placement services and coordination of local business and NGOs to equip the refugees with the resources necessary to become self-reliant and contribute to the local economy.

Another important issue is security in and around the refugee camps. This has created security issues with the high population of refugees, not only in the refugee camps but also in the borders. Cases of violence and crime within and near camps have increased the tension between refugees and the locals. It is quite important to strengthen security in and around refugee camps as a form of safeguarding refugees and the locals. This can be done by carrying out more policing, community involvement programmes and conflict resolution programmes that will seek to create trust between refugees and the local communities. The tensions can be minimized by creating the feeling of safety and security, and the process of integration can be carried out more easily. It is also important to ensure that community is part of the process of integration. The involvement of local communities in the work with refugees can contribute to the minimization of tensions and enhance the level of social cohesion. As an illustration, mutual understanding and cooperation between the refugees and the local people can be facilitated through community centres, cultural exchange programs and joint projects³². The integration process may become more sustainable because the refugees will feel part of the solution and support, besides, making sure that the local communities are also the part of the solution.

³⁰ POLUS, Jebat, 2024.

³¹ DALAKOGLU, D. Beyond spontaneity: Crisis, violence and collective action in Athens. *City*, 2012, 16(5), 535-545.

³² Ibid.

There is a possibility to transform the efficiency of handling refugees with the help of technology. The digital platforms will have the power to simplify the asylum process since refugees will be able to follow the status of their applications, make appointments, and obtain necessary information regarding their rights and services that are available to them. Refugees can also be assisted by online language classes and job-matching applications to get the skills they require to fit in the labour force. Through the application of technology, Greece will be able to improve its capacity to deal with the refugee crisis in a more efficient manner and increase the accessibility of the services required by refugees.

Another important area of concern is to provide proper mental health support. Various refugees have been subjected to high trauma due to the conflicts they ran away with and the dangerous routes they used to get to Greece. Mental health services such as counselling, therapy, and support groups should also be made available to enable the refugees to overcome such experiences³³. Mental health care needs to be incorporated into any refugee support initiatives, and it needs to be trauma-focused and consider the psychological and emotional consequences of displacement and conflict.

Education is a right and a critical element of effective integration of the refugees. The children who are refugees should be able to access good education to secure their future. Policies on inclusive education which offer language support and counselling and cultural sensitivity training to teachers are necessary to assist the refugees' children assimilate in the school setting and realize their potentials optimally. Besides the formal education training, non-formal education can offer good opportunities to the refugee youth and adults through vocational training and community learning centres to attain practical skills and improve their employability.

The solutions to the refugee crisis should be sustainable to touch on the causes of migration. Migration drivers are conflict, poverty, and environmental issues in countries of origin of refugees. To solve these problems, it is necessary to cooperate internationally and develop strategies of long-term development³⁴. The issue of stability and prosperity in war-torn and displaced regions should be facilitated by Greece and international organisations like the UNHCR and IOM. This will assist in minimizing on the people having to run out of their houses in search of shelter elsewhere. The European Union cooperation and sharing of burden in the international context is also important in solving refugee crisis. Geographical location has made Greece carry a disproportionate burden of the refugees. The refugees should be more evenly distributed across all the EU member states to balance the burden on the resources and infrastructure of Greece. It takes a political will and unity of the EU members, along with the clear mechanisms of shifting refugees and distributing the duties in a more balanced way.

The community involvement activities and awareness campaigns may be critical in ensuring that they have a positive attitude towards refugees and facilitating their integration. Such campaigns will be able to show the benefits refugees bring to the society and overcome negative stereotypes and make local communities believe it is in their best interest to accept and assist refugees³⁵. Opportunities to experience meaningful interactions between residents and refugees can be given by cultural festivals and intercultural dialogues and other community-driven initiatives that help to establish mutual love and respect.

³³ POLUS, Jebat, 2024.

³⁴ KOOPMANS, Challenging immigration and ethnic relations politics, 2000.

³⁵ BOANO, C. AND F. VERGARA-PERUCICH *Neoliberalism and urban development in Latin America*. Edition ed.: Routledge Oxon, New York, 2017.

9. Conclusion

This research paper gives an assessment of the refugee policy in Greece including historical, legislative and socio-political issues that have influenced the attitude of the Greek to migration. Geographical location is a major problem that Greece has had to endure since 2015 since the country is a major entry point to Europe. Since the inflow of refugees and migrants grew continuously, the country has worked out various policies to cope with the situation and balance the legal and social and humanitarian interests.

As a frontline state in the European Union, Greece has navigated the complexities of international and EU asylum laws, such as the CEAS and the Dublin Regulation. These frameworks have shaped the national approach, requiring Greece to align its domestic policies with EU directives, while also responding to the practical realities of migration. Notable steps have been taken to improve Greece's refugee management, such as the implementation of the HELIOS program and increased collaboration with the EU, including funding from the AMIF. These initiatives have helped to improve infrastructure and processing capacity, highlighting Greece's ongoing commitment to enhancing its asylum system.

However, challenges remain. Such reception centers like the Moria camp have highlighted the necessity of more efficient solutions and despite the fact that Greece has improved in certain aspects, there are still major areas of weakness. Inefficiencies that are still present in the asylum system are backloads, long processing time and inconsistent decisions. Conditions are still tense at the reception points, particularly at the Aegean islands, where it is typical to have overcrowded camps and under-resourced facilities despite the newer models such as Closed Controlled Access Centres have not met humanitarian expectations. Most refugees are still exposed to extended periods of poor living conditions with minimal access to medical services, legal assistance, and mental health. The integration policies are also on the infantile stages and the refugees mostly encounter challenges like language barrier, lack of recognised qualifications and discrimination in the labour market which prevents their full incorporation in the society.

In the future, Greece will need the further assistance of the international community, in particular, the EU to overcome these long-term problems. The long-term funding, technical help, and the ability to build capacity will be necessary to make the asylum processes more efficient, improve the terms of reception, and create more opportunities to integrate. Financial aid must however be in time and adequate to both satisfy the needs of the refugees as well as the local people who host them. In addition to financing, it will take a long-term dedication by the EU partners and international bodies to improve the administrative and legal structure of Greece.

It is also crucial that there is the necessity of the change in the approach that the EU is taking towards migration management. The existing system that tends to incorporate migration as an emergency needs to transform into a more organized system that is long-term. An obligatory and irreversible process of moving people, such as, would lead to a more solid and responsible attitude between EU member-states, where the difficulties of deporting refugees are distributed more equally.

Conclusively, the capacity of Greece to adequately deal with refugee flows cannot be attributed to national initiatives alone but a combined and a humane approach by the EU, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and local people. It will be necessary to develop a sustainable and humane method of refugee protection, which will entail systemic reform, a long-term perspective, and co-operations and solidarity-based approach throughout Europe. The collaboration of the EU and its member states can establish a stronger and fairer system that will benefit refugees and the hosting societies, becoming stable and integrative in the coming years.

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