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# Migration and Refugee Flows in Greece in the Post-Crisis Period: Exploring Different Claims for Socio-Spatial Justice

Apostolos G. Papadopoulos and Loukia-Maria Fratsea

## **Migration and refugee flows in Greece in the post-crisis period: Exploring different claims for socio-spatial justice**

The socioeconomic and political situation in Greece offers a significant context for addressing migration and refugee flows along with asylum and migration policies. The «migration/refugee crisis» (2015) was added to an already deepening economic crisis. In Greece, public opinion has addressed migration and asylum as a «problem» which needs to be «resolved», while the management of migration and asylum has been affected by the Eu securitization agenda. The paper seeks to identify and discuss the changing opportunities and challenges presented to and facing the newly arriving populations of migrants and refugees in Greece in the context of economic development. This shifts the discussion away from «human security» approach that aligns with right-wing populism. The paper's primary focus is on exploring the previous movements of the newly arriving populations, reflecting on the challenges they face upon arrival in Greece, and analysing their integration prospects in the local receiving societies. The paper is structured into three main sections: the first section outlines the main developments in relation to asylum and migration in Greece in the period from the start of the economic recession to the present. The second section presents the empirical findings collected in the period 2017-2019 and centres on the perceptions and narratives of refugees, as well as stakeholders and policymakers who have been involved in the implementation of asylum and migration policy. The concluding section addresses the main issues raised by the previous sections and outlines the social and spatial justice claims raised at different spatial levels.

*Keywords:* refugees, migrations flows, Syrians, migration/refugee crisis, Greece.

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## 1. Introduction

Migration and asylum are considered two facets of the migratory phenomenon which has attracted the attention of politicians and the wider public in recent years. Actually, the new era – which is emphatically called the «Age of Migration» – signifies a shift towards a political emphasis on migratory issues in recent decades (Castles *et al.* 2014). There has been a wider turn towards the intensification of migration control in Western countries following the events of 9/11. Migration has moved to the centre stage of global problems and has attracted the attention of politicians, policymakers and intellectuals. The importance of migration has created a paradoxical situation whereby «the ability to control migration has shrunk as the desire to do so has increased» (Bhagwati 2003, 99). Governments seeking ways to curb public discontent fail to acknowledge, or even downplay, the reality that borders are beyond their control and that little can be done to diminish migration flows. The «human security» approach – that prioritizes the security of the indigenous population against external threats – and right-wing populism have affected the Eu migration policy agenda, along with the national policies of member states (Kontis 2017).

The socioeconomic and political situation in Greece offers a significant context for addressing migration and refugee flows along with asylum and migration policies. The Great Recession of 2008/09 has created a depressing socioeconomic environment which has severely affected peoples' lives for a long period (2009-2016). As an indicator of the recession, it is mentioned that the country's Gdp decreased by 26% in the period 2008-2014 (Oecd 2016). However, when it comes to households, the decrease in their income was more dramatic (42%) over the same period (Matsaganis *et al.* 2018). In particular, those most affected by this vast decline in income were Greece's youth, lower strata and migrant population. More to the point, the contraction in employment and high unemployment rates were part and parcel of the economic recession which lasted for nearly a decade.

The «migration/refugee crisis» – identified by the increased population flows heading for Europe and passing mainly through Greece in 2015 – compounded an already deepening economic crisis, creating a «perfect storm» of political and socioeconomic turmoil in the country (Papadopoulos 2017). This situation was due to the continuation of conflicts in Syria, which triggered mass population movements towards the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, all of which provided temporary shelter until 2014. The Turkish administrative authorities, which bore the burden of the mass population movements from Syria, had limited capacity and financial resources to respond to and manage the Syrian refugee crisis (Icduygu 2015); as a result, vast numbers of Syrians headed for Europe in the period 2015-2016. Eu officials underestimated the situation and therefore did not expect, and were unprepared for, an unprecedented massive inflow of migrants/refugees into

Europe<sup>1</sup>; Syrians were initially predominant in this inflow, but other nationalities would quickly join it and enlarge the flow.

A number of factors operated cumulatively to create a «perfect storm». These included (Spijkerboer 2016): the existence of large numbers of Syrian refugees; serious under-funding for the provision of services near to the refugees' home country; minimal resettlement of Syrians in other parts of the world; the prohibition of travel, which created considerable problems to those who needed to move away from overburdened camps; a prohibition on entering the Eu and the encouraging of neighbouring countries to adopt a similar strategy; the inadequacies and failures of the Common European Asylum System; the systematic underestimation of the Syrian conflict as a source of massive outflows; and the exploitation of population movements for political gain. As a result of the above, the migrant and refugee movements towards Europe through border countries such as Greece soon got out of hand and resulted in a situation in which panicking individual governments took unilateral decisions shaped by the domestic politics of border closure (Betts and Collier 2018).

More importantly, the rising numbers of migrants and asylum seekers, stressed and/or re-iterated by the media in recent years, has been important in formulating public opinion in relation to asylum and migration, forcing adjustments to relevant policies implemented at the European and national level. In the Greek context, the discourse has centred on the «migration/refugee crisis» with migration and asylum as a «problem» which needs to be «resolved», while the management of migration and asylum has been affected by the Eu securitization agenda which has been gaining ground in recent years (Papadopoulos 2018). Compared to other Mediterranean countries, Greece received the highest number of migrants/refugees (52% of over 2 million) in the period 2015-2019. Moreover, the demographics of the newly arriving populations to Greece differ from the other countries, since two fifths are men, one quarter are women and over one third are children; the major nationalities of the new arrivals in 2019 were Afghans (40%), Syrians (27%), Congolese (7%), Iraqis (6%) and Palestinians (5%)<sup>2</sup>.

This paper aims to identify and discuss the changing opportunities available to and challenges facing the newly arriving populations of migrants and refugees in Greece in the context of economic development and a human security approach that aligns with right-wing populism. The latter shift in favour of economic development is supported by various writers who approach asylum and migration issues in various ways; more importantly, it suggests that a global approach to migration should be developed and supported (Glick Schiller 2010; Isotalo 2010; Castles 2018; de Haas 2018; Wihtol de Wenden 2018; Betts and Collier 2018). Such a global approach would stress the broader drivers and dynamics of migration, while

<sup>1</sup> At the 2015 Emn Conference, Matthias Ruete (Director General of Migration and Home Affairs) highlighted that the Eu was facing an «unprecedented crisis» with «unprecedented» flows of refugees and migrants for which the «current system was not designed» (see <http://www.eu2015lu.eu/en/actualites/articles-actualite/2015/10/08-conf-schengen-panel/>).

<sup>2</sup> The data were taken from the Unhcr (2019a; 2019b) portal (see <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/>).

simultaneously shifting the focus on to the transnational problematic along with cross-sectional linkages between migration and well-being.

The main focus of the paper is on exploring the previous movements of the recently arriving populations, reflecting on the challenges they face upon their arrival in Greece, and analysing their prospects of integration into the local receiving societies. Certainly, the interaction between the newly arriving populations and the indigenous population raises a number of social and spatial justice claims on both sides. Due to the complexity of the discussion on socio-spatial justice, we would like to briefly reference Fraser's (2010) double-edged notion of justice, which includes, on the one hand, the «fair assessment of competing claims» (moral balance) and, on the other, the fact that «the justice claims are increasingly mapped in competing geographical scales» (the problematic of framing). These two «images» of justice need to be addressed and illustrated in the following sections in order to provide a basis for understanding the societal challenges and policy issues that arise from the management of migrant and refugee flows of different magnitudes. Rejecting the conventional approach of handling the justice claims of economic migrants and asylum seekers and refugees as separate categories on the basis of the political will, discretion and moral obligation of nation-states (Miller 2012; 2015), Fraser transforms the challenge of achieving socio-spatial justice into a more complex discussion of moral balance, the framings of justice, and power struggles over justice claims.

The paper is structured into three main sections: the first section outlines the main developments in relation to asylum and migration in Greece in the period of the economic recession and currently. The second section lays out the empirical findings collected in the period 2017-2019 and centres on the narratives of refugees and various stakeholders and policymakers who have been involved in the implementation of asylum and migration policy. The concluding section addresses the main issues raised by the previous sections and outlines the various social and spatial justice claims at different spatial levels.

## **2. Migration and refugee flows and policy responses in the (post-)crisis period**

The discussion on migrant and refugee flows towards Greece did not start in 2015, but rather in the early 1990s when increasing numbers of migrants originating predominantly from the Balkans (mostly from Albania, but also from Bulgaria and Romania) began crossing the country's borders illegally. It is usually stated that Greece became an immigration country and left behind its emigration past, implying that it had become a relatively richer country and therefore a destination for migrants seeking to improve their well-being and to search for better employment opportunities (Kasimis 2012). Migrants very often considered Greece as a stepping-stone or starting point on their way to other, more «developed», countries in Europe.

Migration to Greece has demarcated a new era of economic development and societal evolution, which also brought about new challenges and

Tab. 1. *Periodization of migration/refugee flows to Greece, 1990-2019*

Period	Main flows	Main policies to manage flows
1990-1996	The majority of Albanians arrived in the first wave of immigration, but many also followed in the wake of the collapse of the enormous «pyramid schemes» in Albania's banking sector in 1996.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bilateral Agreement between Bulgaria and Greece for Seasonal Migration (1995)</li> <li>- Friendship, Cooperation, Good Neighbourliness and Security Agreement between Greece and Albania (1996)</li> </ul>
1997-2001	Greater numbers of migrants originating from other Balkan states, the former Soviet Union, Pakistan and India arrived during this period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bilateral Agreement between Albania and Greece for Seasonal Migration (1997)</li> <li>- Bilateral Readmission Agreement between Turkey and Greece (2001)</li> </ul>
2002-2014	The largest proportion of irregular immigrants originated from Asia and Africa. The recent accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Eu led to increased inflows of migrant workers who were employed illegally in low-skilled jobs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bilateral Agreement between Egypt and Greece for migrant labour in fisheries (2005)</li> <li>- National Action Plan on Migration and Asylum Management (2010)</li> <li>- Revised Action Plan on Asylum and Migration Management (2012)</li> <li>- Eu-Turkey Readmission Agreement (2013)</li> </ul>
2015-today	The recent «refugee and migration crisis» has had an impact on Greece (and Italy) as the first receiving country(s). Mostly Syrians, but also Iranians, Afghans and other Asians and Africans poured into the country on their way to other European destinations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Greek Government's Road Map on Asylum (2015)</li> <li>- Eu-Turkey Joint Action Plan (2015)</li> <li>- Eu-Turkey Statement (2016)</li> </ul>

*Source:* Authors' compilation.

opportunities. Since the 1990s, the Greek state's main concern has been to manage the flows by continuously (re)constructing policies which determine migrants' access to the labour market (Papadopoulos 2018). Due to the seasonal needs of the regional labour markets, significant effort was invested in signing agreements which regulated seasonal migrant labour with neighbouring countries (e.g. Albania and Bulgaria) and which applied to specific economic sectors (Egypt) (see Table 1). However, these agreements did not offer the required benefits and were seen as insufficient for curbing the expanding flows originating from the wider Balkan region.

In 2001, Greece and Turkey signed a bilateral readmission agreement with the expressed aim on the Greek side of managing the growing migrant flows pouring into the country through Turkey. However, this agreement proved ineffectual, due to the fact that Turkey rejected a high number of the readmission requests made by Greece. The implementation of the readmission agreement was extremely slow in the first years, but even when Turkey started accepting some readmission requests (by 2006), there were still remarkable delays and problems (Sezgi Sözen 2015). In the years

to come, the readmission agreement between Greece and Turkey would become defunct, leading to inconclusive discussions focused on the issues connected to the management of migration flows passing through the Greek-Turkish land and sea borders.

By the mid-2000s, the older migration flows originating from the Balkans and the recent flows originating from Asia and Africa had come to pose a range of challenges for Greek society, the Greek economy, and the country's political elites. There were cases in which the Greek state tried to frame migration policies on the basis of its own needs and conditions, manifesting a defensive approach (Vitsentzatos 2017). It was obvious by this time that an asylum and migration policy focused on labour market requirements for legalizing migrants would need to be adjusted to respond to the changing flows of migrants and refugees who included Greece in their migratory journeys and aspired for a more stable and secure life.

In this context, the Dublin Regulation merits attention, since it specifies that asylum seekers are obliged to apply for asylum in the first country of arrival, and seeks to prevent applicants from submitting applications in different Eu countries. In principle, if the migrants and asylum seekers are arrested in an Eu country their fingerprints are checked and they are returned to their point of entry. However, in January 2011, the European Court of Human Rights decided to exclude Greece from the returns, since the country appeared to be violating refugees' human rights. The European Commission recommended in March 2017 that returns to Greece resumed, but the returns were carried out slowly and did not include vulnerable persons.

In 2010, the Greek Ministry of Citizen Protection drafted its National Action Plan for Migration and Asylum Management and sent it to the European Commission. The Action Plan set out the Greek Government's strategy for managing migration, which covered the screening of irregular migrants, the new asylum system, detention, repatriation and returns. The implementation of the Greek Action Plan on Asylum and Migration Management was revised in August 2012 and again in January 2013, but ceased to be implemented by the end of 2014 (see Table 1). The Revised Action Plan on Asylum and Migration Management sought to establish a simple, effective and straightforward system which included the following elements: the rationalization of the asylum system, the effective tackling of abuse, an effective system of border management and a functional returns' policy<sup>3</sup>.

By 2015, it was clear that the priorities had changed. A Road Map for Asylum was therefore formulated with goals such as ensuring adequate first reception conditions for migrants on their arrival, providing full access to a fair and effective asylum procedure, and increasing the capacity in open accommodation for asylum seekers; priority was given to actions tailoring made to address the judgments of the European courts and pending key issues in asylum and the reception of migrants. Funding to support the actions foreseen by the Road Map was allocated from the State budget, while additional funding would be mobilized through the Eu Home Affairs

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2013/jun/eu-council-greece-asylum-action-plan-10327-13.pdf>.



Funds with complementary funding from various European Funds (Council of Europe 2015).

Following on from the Eu-Turkey Joint Action Plan (2015), which was formulated during a prolonged process, the Eu and Turkey signed the so-called Eu-Turkey Statement on 18 March 2016<sup>4</sup>. Through this document, the Eu and Turkey agreed on a number of issues: *inter alia*, all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 would be returned to Turkey. For every Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian would be resettled in the Eu. Turkey would take those measures deemed necessary to prevent the opening of new sea or land routes for irregular migration. The Eu would further speed up the disbursement of the €3 billion initially allocated through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. The Eu-Turkey Statement was formulated in response to the shutting down of the Balkan route, which had resulted in a growing number of migrants and refugees being stranded in Greece<sup>5</sup>.

In the context of the economic crisis, the pressure exerted by migrant and refugees flows on Greek society and economy was felt particularly keenly, raising issues of social and spatial justice within the country. Moreover, the design and implementation of the policies on migration and asylum posed issues of socio-spatial injustice, which are examined in the concluding section.

The data from the Unhcr and the Hellenic Ministry for Citizen Protection provide an interesting picture of migrant and refugee inflows into Greece before and after the financial crisis (Figure 1). Arrivals via the Turkish borders fell to a minimum of 12,556 people in 2013 as a result of a downward trend in the period 2010-2013. However, arrivals increased to 43,318 people in 2014 and peaked at 861,630 in 2015, signifying the peak of the so-called «migration and refugee crisis». Following the Eu-Turkey Statement, the number of arrivals fell to 177,234 in 2016, the vast majority of whom (90%) crossed the border before the agreement came into effect. By 2017, the number of arrivals had decreased to 36,310, but in the following years the number of arrivals started to rise once more: to 50,580 in 2018 and 74,348 in 2019. The increased arrivals reflect a wider change which started after 2013 which makes Greece the main receiver of migrant and refugee flows in the Eu. In fact, over 80% of all European flows passed through the Greek-Turkish border in 2015, 50% in 2016 and 60% in 2019.

The closure of the Balkan route and the increasing numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in Greece resulted in an increasing number of people being stranded in the country and, more particularly, in the Aegean Islands. Moreover, far too few returns are being made to Turkey to alleviate the pressure and counter the smugglers' business model. According to a recent Eu report, in the period 2016-2019, only 2,001 people were returned from Greece to Turkey under the Eu-Turkey Statement and 601 under the Greece-Turkey bilateral protocol (European Commission 2019, 3; Unhcr 2019a)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mfa.gr/en/foreign-policy/greece-in-the-eu/eu-policy-on-migration-and-asylum.html>.

<sup>6</sup> The majority of those returned to Turkey are Pakistanis (37%) and Syrians (18%), followed by Algerians, Afghans, Iraqis and Bangladeshis. Out of the total number of Syrians, 44% did not express a



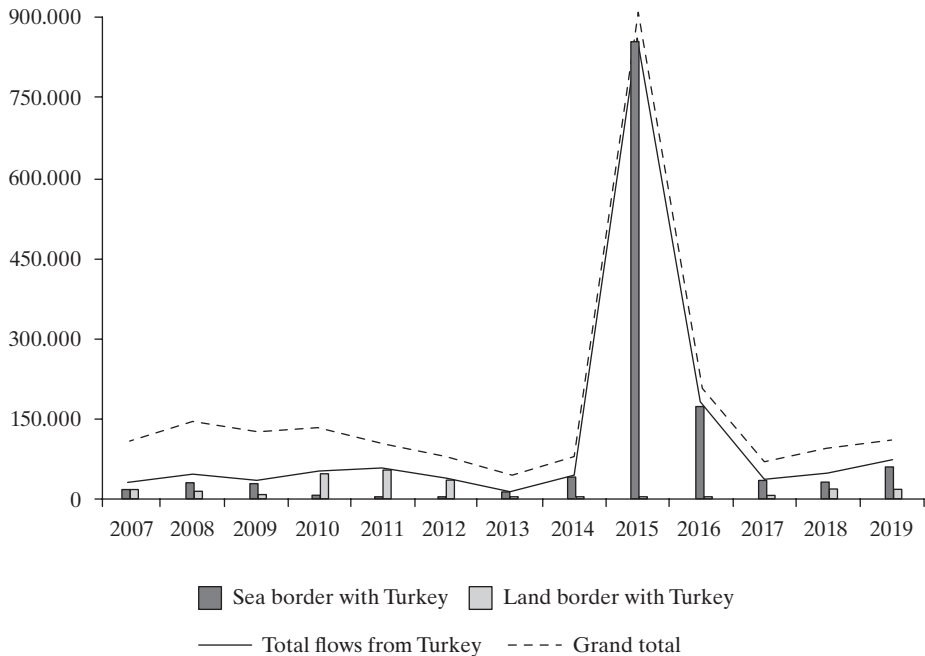


Fig. 1. Migrant/refugee arrivals via the Turkish border and total arrivals, 2007-2019.

Source: Unhcr (2019a); Greek Ministry of Citizen Protection (2019).

Since 2016, the situation in Greece has changed considerably, not only in terms of the increased number of asylum claims submitted by the newly-arrived, but also due to the growing number of migrants and refugees crowded into reception centres following the «geographical restriction» devised to facilitate the Eu-Turkey Statement<sup>7</sup>. Geographical restriction foresaw that those asylum seekers arriving on the islands would have to await the outcome of their claim before they were given the right to move to the mainland; clearly out of line with the relevant legal standards, such restriction reflects a «managerial» and state bureaucracy stance to the issue. As underlined by the Ngos involved, this restriction turned Greece's «hotspot» facilities into detention centres; all newly-arrived asylum-seekers from 20 March 2016 on have been automatically detained in them (Aida 2016, 25).

The number of newly-arrived migrants and refugees packed onto the Aegean Islands has been rising since the inception of the Eu-Turkey Statement. However, in recent months, this trend has intensified, resulting in a threefold increase in the number of migrants and refugees kept in the de-

will to apply for asylum or withdrew their asylum claims in Greece, while around 12% of asylum claims were found inadmissible at second instance.

<sup>7</sup> The «geographical restriction» was initiated with Asylum Law 4375/2016 (article 60). This provision concerns the majority of the new arrivals, but there are exceptions for vulnerable individuals and families who soon enough are transferred to the mainland.

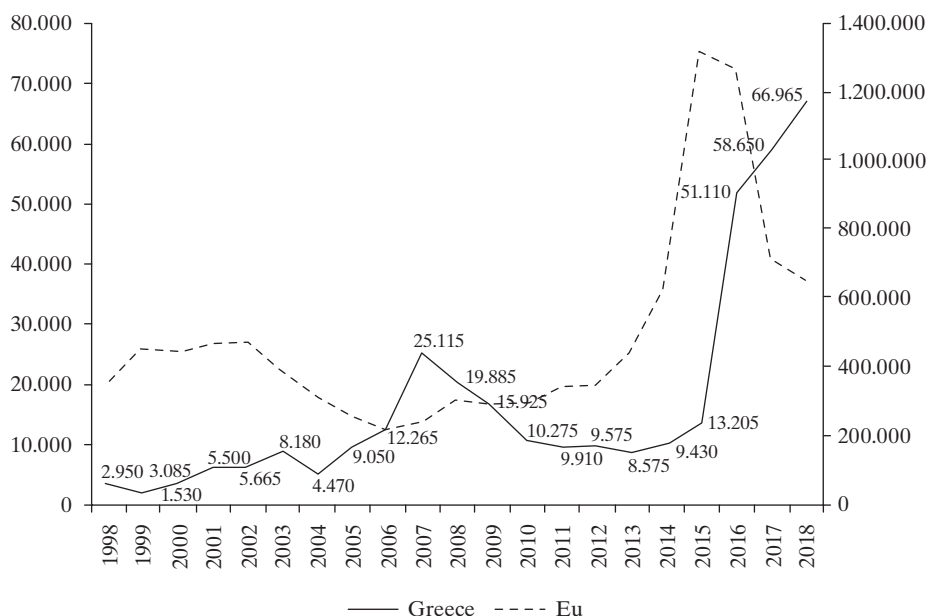


FIG. 2. Asylum claims made in Greece and the Eu, 1998-2018.

Source: Eurostat (2019).

tention centres over the last year or so. More particularly, the number of people held increased from 14,615 in December 2018 to 41,926 in December 2019. Especially for those who are stuck in the island camps, it is virtually compulsory to claim asylum and do their best to move to the Greek mainland or abroad when the opportunity presents itself.

The vast majority of newly arrived migrants and refugees therefore submit claims for asylum. On the basis of Figure 2, it becomes evident that the number of asylum claims filed in Greece increased sixfold in the period 2004-2007, declined in the subsequent period, remained at a low level between 2010 and 2013, and then increased eightfold since 2013. More specifically, in the period 2016-2018, Greece received a record number of asylum claims per year (over 50,000); the number of claims made at the Eu level fell during this same period.

Comparing Greece with other Eu countries with high levels of asylum claims, it becomes clear that the period 2013-2018 witnessed an upward turn in the number of asylum claims in Greece, France and Spain (Figure 3). Germany, which received the highest number of claims throughout the period, experienced massive amounts of claims in 2014 and 2015. Italy also experienced a rapid increase in asylum claims between 2010 and 2017 and was second in the number of claims received in 2014 and 2017. However, by 2018, Greece was in third position after Germany and France. In both 2017 and 2018, Greece had the highest number of asylum requests per capita in the Eu (Esi 2019). This implies that its asylum system is overburdened by

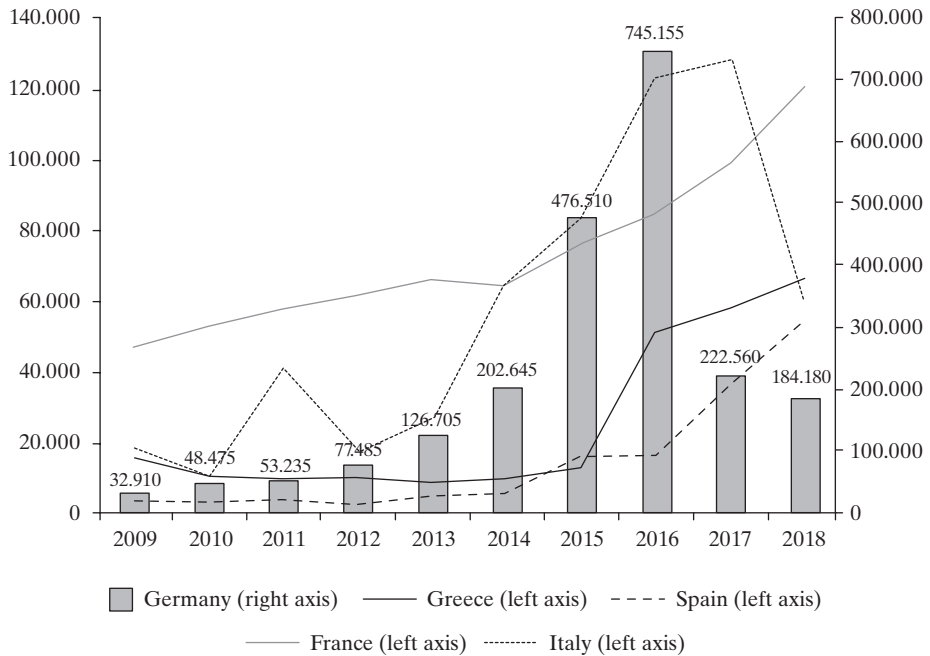


FIG. 3. Asylum claims per country, 2009-2018.

Source: Eurostat (2019).

the claims of newly arrived migrants and refugees seeking ways to secure their stay in Europe and to avoid being deported back to Turkey.

Currently, there are around 111,000 newly arrived migrants and refugees in Greece who came here post-2015. Of these, 70,000 live on the mainland (refugee camps, apartments and hotels) and 41,000 on the islands, in dire conditions. Some 41,300 migrants/refugees reside on the Aegean islands: the majority are from Afghanistan (48%), Syria (20%), Palestine (6%), Somalia (6%) and Congo (6%). In all, 88% live in reception centres, while the rest stay in Unhcr accommodation (4%) or elsewhere (8%). Half of them are men, with women accounting for 21% and minors for 29%; six out of ten of the children are under 12 years old (Unhcr 2020).

Of the population of migrants/refugees who have been given accommodation, as of December 2019, 21,620 people in all were living in 4,537 apartments. It should be noted that the vast majority of accommodation units are provided in the regions of Attica (53%) and Central Macedonia (21%). As for the nationalities of those hosted, 40% are Syrians, 21% Iraqis and 20% Afghans (Unhcr 2019b; 2019c). A large number of migrants and refugees live outside the camps in accommodation provided by the state.

Of those who arrived in 2019, just 20% entered through the Evros land border area; the rest crossed the sea borders and landed on an island. Les-

vos has received the majority of new migrant and refugee flows – 36% of the newly arrived by 2019 –, followed by Samos (14%), Chios (11%), Kos (8%) and Leros (6%). That the newly arrived populations are more numerous, sometimes many times over, than the permanent inhabitants poses problems for these islands. Moreover, given that a number of services, organisations and infrastructures need to be in place to receive the incoming populations and provide for them, the challenges facing the local people increase over time. It is not surprising that the continued daily flows of newly arriving migrants and refugees have left the local people feeling increasingly reluctant to help, disappointed, or even in despair, despite both their democratic feelings and tradition of social solidarity, and the massive economic assistance their islands receive from the state, the Eu and Ngos<sup>8</sup>. Local societies, especially those that are hosting camps and/or open reception centres, have started reacting against the flows and government policies<sup>9</sup>. What is more, the location of these camps and open reception centres was not carefully selected in terms of their access to health, education and other goods and services (Stamatoukou 2020). For the migrants and refugees themselves, staying on the islands is a dehumanizing experience which is at the root of the mental health issues which many of them are facing<sup>10</sup>. Many reports which has sought to get to grips with the admittedly very bad conditions for migrants and refugees on the islands have concluded that the situation acts as a discouraging factor, which sends a message out to those who may want to cross the borders<sup>11</sup>. This self-evident «policy of deterrence» adopted by the Greek state – which is not new and has created its own path dependency – has had an immense impact on the lives of locals and, most importantly, the lives of migrants and refugees (Xypolitas 2019). The current government’s rhetoric centred on decongesting the islands by transferring large numbers of the newly arrived to the mainland was met with increased scepticism due, on the one hand, to the alleged encouraging message it would sent out to the migrants and refugees who are in Turkish territory waiting to cross the border and, on the other hand, to the fact that the mainland is unprepared to receive masses of new arrivals<sup>12</sup>.

Syrians accounted for a significant share of the migrant and refugee flows in 2015-2016, but whose numbers have dwindled since. In 2019, the proportion of Syrians in the total number of new arrivals remained at 27%, but they remain the main recipients of asylum, accommodation and inclusion policies. For example, of those given accommodation by the state, 40% are Syrians, who also constitute a large majority among beneficiaries of the Relocation Scheme<sup>13</sup> which the Eu ran for a total duration of two years

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/on-a-greek-island-that-welcomed-migrants-residents-and-refugees-fe-el-abandoned>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1529352/reactions-incidents-related-to-resurgent-migrant-crisis-faced-by-greece-multiply-new-arrivals-reported>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/world/europe/migrants-greece-aegean-islands.html>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://euobserver.com/migration/145757>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2019/12/5/refugee-mainland-Greece>.

<sup>13</sup> The Relocation Scheme has admittedly lower rates of implementation compared to the initial

(September 2015-September 2017) and which foresaw the relocation of asylum seekers and refugees to other Eu member states. In 2017, Syrians accounted for the largest number of applicants in 14 of the 28 Eu member states, including 49,000 applicants in Germany and 16,000 in Greece. Moreover, the recognition rate for Syrians at first instance was 99.6% in Greece (the rate across the whole Eu was 94%), which implies that every claim made was accepted (The Greek Ombudsman 2019). By the end of 2018, the total number of Syrian asylum seekers and refugees was over 38,000; the majority were given refugee status. It may be said that Syrians receive better treatment than other newly arriving populations, who tend to be stuck for longer periods on the islands, to be detained for longer in reception camps, to face delays in getting their claims through the asylum system, and to not be given accommodation in apartments while they await for their claim to be considered.

It has been underlined that, following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Turkey has become the host of the largest refugee population in the world, while the refugee populations were handled rather unsystematically, with frequent institutional and regulatory changes (Icduygu 2015; Adali & Türkyilmaz 2020). The literature on Syrians in Turkey is rapidly expanding, illustrating the challenges faced by the host society, but more importantly pointing out the opportunities Syrians have provided for the country's labour market. It is known that Syrians living in Turkey under a temporary protection regime have provided cheap labour to the country's agricultural, manufacturing and other labour-intensive sectors. Their arrival has been a unique opportunity for the Turkish seasonal agricultural labour market to cover its labour needs at a low cost, and Syrians fill the lower ranks of the agricultural labour force in precarious labour positions (Pelek 2019). But not all Syrians are included in the secondary and/or informal labour market. While the unskilled struggle to access the labour market, or are offered low-paid jobs in the informal labour market, those with better economic resources, social capital and social networks may establish businesses, construct connections with the locals and engage in socio-cultural activities. Therefore, there are different tiers of social integration for Syrians on the basis of their economic resources and social class characteristics (Şimşek 2018).

Effectively, it has been pointed out that the Syrian refugees can be divided into different groups depending on their aspirations and capabilities. Some groups want to leave Turkey due to legal vulnerability and limited access to health services. Moreover, migration decisions are also influenced by family networks, along with the location of family members. Life satisfaction, future aspirations and the (un)substantiated hope for a future return to Syria are other factors that continue to impact significantly on Syrians' decisions about migration (Müller-Funk 2019).

number (120,000) that were to have been relocated from Greece and Italy to other Eu member states. The Relocation Scheme ended in September 2017; after that, only pending cases were relocated. Between November 2015 and March 2018 some 12,700 people were relocated from Italy and 22,000 from Greece (Esi 2019); that is one fourth of the target number of relocations.

In this context, the journeys of migrants and refugees, and more particularly Syrians, to Greece and Europe should not be seen as an inevitable process, but rather as one possibility among many, despite the constraining policies and pressures to contain migration movements. Set against the omnipresent «methodological nationalism» and «Eurocentric» reading of migrant and refugee aspirations and motives that overestimate the attraction of the developed world (Žižek 2016), we should look at the interconnections between countries in a globalised arena (Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013) that allow migrants and refugees to develop aspirations, to elaborate strategies, to facilitate movements, and to make decisions about migration.

### 3. Qualitative research findings regarding Syrian refugees

#### 3.1. Methodology

Despite «migration and refugee crisis» having been at the top of the political agenda since 2015, as well as dominating the public and academic discourse, only recently has research into the integration challenges and prospects facing Syrian refugees started to expand into Greece. The expanding research has focused on examining the implications for asylum and migration policy (Afouxenidis *et al.* 2017; Papadopoulos 2017), the media coverage of the «crisis» (Triandafyllidou 2018), the housing conditions (Kourachanis 2018) and health challenges facing the newly arriving populations (Stathopoulou & Eikemo 2019) and the living conditions in the preliminary arrival structures and reception centres (Mavrommatis 2018; Kandylis 2019; Xypolitas 2019). The findings presented here are based on research in process, which is being conducted in the context of the Imajine project which seeks to examine the relationship between various forms of mobilities and spatial justice<sup>14</sup>. In this context, we are exploring the Syrian refugees' experiences, living conditions and mobility aspirations before and during displacement. In more detail, we are focusing on Syrian refugees who are currently living in Athens (urban) and the Western Greece (rural), either in open reception camps<sup>15</sup> or in rented apartments. To date, more than 25 interviews with Syrian refugees and asylum seekers have been conducted, while additional interviews have been carried out with various stakeholders in both areas (e.g. civil society representatives, mayors and civil servants, policy-makers, etc.). The refugee population was selected through civil society organizations, personal contacts, and snowball sampling, while particular attention was paid to include participants with various characteristics (i.e. gender, educational level, family status, stage in the lifecycle). Interviews

<sup>14</sup> See Acknowledgements.

<sup>15</sup> In 2016, an open reception camp was established in Myrsini village in the Western Peloponnese, in a former holiday resort called «Lm Village». At the time, this initiative was facilitated by the Mayor, who is of Syrian descent but has attained Greek citizenship. At any one time, around 300 Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees reside in this small camp.

were carried out in Greek, English and Arabic, as a member of our research team spoke Arabic. The interviewees appear under pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. The collected material was transcribed and analysed using Maxqda qualitative analysis software. The narratives of Syrian refugees illustrate their journey away from war and conflict in Syria in search of refuge and a better life in other countries, their living conditions at the places they stopped at along the way, the challenges they encounter and their future plans. The presentation of empirical findings is structured along two axes: the escape from Syria and time in Turkey, and the conditions of living and longing in Greece.

### *3.2. Escape the war and conflicts in Syria and reaching Turkey*

Before the Syrian uprising in 2011, the interviewees generally described their lives as «normal» and said they had no intention of leaving their place of residence. How the respondents present their lives before the turbulence impacts on how they responded to the factors that pushed and/or enabled them to seek protection and well-being far from their birthplaces. As Nizar remembers:

I was thinking of marriage or something like that to make a home... or normal things... until the war came [...] and I was afraid for my life (Nizar, male, 31 years old).

Escaping war and conflict and fearing for their life and family were their basic reasons for deciding to leave Syria towards a «safer place». However, the initial displacement was within Syria. Many of our interviewees did not intend – at least at the beginning – to cross the international border in search of sanctuary; rather, they remained in their home countries. Our respondents explain that many Syrians were moving towards towns and regions that were considered safer and/or had not been destroyed by the conflict. Their discourses are often mixed with their family stories and their assessment of the situation at different periods of time. As Rifat describes:

I was living in Aleppo, so it was safe before, and then the bombing started so I escaped [like others did]. I escaped the bombing and moved to Afrin. In Afrin, it was difficult because around it all the roads had been destroyed, and there was no medical assistance, so I decided to leave. And then I moved to Turkey (Rifat, male, 31 years old).

For many, their primary concern was to try to start anew by relocating within Syria. However, as the situation continued to worsen and the economy and services collapsed, many saw no alternative but to try for a new life in Europe, the Us, or a neighbouring country where the economic situation and feeling of safety were expected to be better. It appears that the linkages between seeking security and aspiring to a better life are closely intertwined:



I started moving from Aleppo, when my place I was living has been bombed, you know... So, I escaped from there, and moved to my village, my home village. It's from Afrin and I stayed... I stayed in Afrin for 4 months, and I couldn't stay more because I didn't have a house, nothing to stay there. So, I moved to Turkey, I stayed in Istanbul. [...] I have imagined Istanbul be better, because it has some safety. I couldn't know if I would be supported or not. If I could find a job or not. But I had to escape from Afrin, which was more difficult (Elias, male, early 30s).

Like their male counterparts, female Syrians decided to flee Syria. As Aischa explains, they weighed up the challenges and difficulties they would face if they remained in Syria; assessing conditions and possible responses became a major task for populations on the move in search of places where the «grass was greener»:

There were two explosions while we were right there in Afrin [...] and I was thinking that I knew that the situation was going to get even worse. So, we [me and my children] left (Aischa, female, 30 years old).

For others the option of staying in Syria was more life threatening, even when they were aware of the difficulties they might encounter while fleeing their country. Sara describes the situation in Syria as more dangerous than the waves and sea, even though she does not know how to swim. Nevertheless, she was convinced that anything she would encounter after the borders would not be as perilous for her as staying in the country.

The sea is not more dangerous than Syria. Surely [the current regime in] Syria is much more dangerous than the sea (Sara, female, 28 years old).

The journey from Syria to other countries is hardly free of constraints and barriers. Some of the respondents considered themselves lucky to have only had to cross the borders once. Others had to try to cross the borders with Turkey multiple times until they achieved it. As Sara puts it:

My mother crossed the borders [just] once. She is an older woman [...]. I tried five times [to cross the border] from Syria to Turkey [...] but the police took me back [to Syria] and I tried again (Sara, female, 28 years old).

In order to reach a destination country and/or the European shore, refugees' journey may have to had to follow entail a number of multiple and complex trajectories. For the vast majority who move towards Europe, their initial destination is Turkey. For some, Turkey, and in particular cities like Izmir or Istanbul, are a «gateway to Europe», a place where they may can stay for a long or short time until they cross the Turkish-Greek border, or which may serve as a temporary «safe place» until they return to Syria (Şimşek 2018). We can distinguish two categories of movements: first, those who stayed for a relatively long time in Turkey (i.e. over six months to some years) and, second, those who used Turkey as a hub. The first category had to stay longer to collect the money needed to finance their journey to Europe; or they stayed in Turkey until they realised their journey could be extended following a shift in their aspirations.

Evidently, in hindsight, both categories perceive their stay in Turkey as transitory; Turkey was a temporary place where they could plan their next movements, collect information regarding the potential land or sea routes to Europe and the cost of crossing the border, and make contact with the intermediaries who offer their services at a price (i.e. smugglers). As they relate:

I talked with a man. [I said] I want to go to Greece... Yes [he said] come to Izmir... I want this money [he said], and next morning I got on the boat and was on the sea to Chios (Sara, female, 28 years old).

Everybody was speaking about one person who was transferring people from Turkey to Chios so I came [to Greece] (Hayyan, male, 19 years old).

There was a guy who asked us, «do you want to go?» and we told him «yes». So he took us [...]. We paid each person, 1,200 euros [...]. We were around 30-31 persons on the boat (Aischa, female, 30 years old).

Some of those who stayed for a brief time in Turkey already had the financial means to finance the border crossing into Europe. The more determined ones had developed their aspirations earlier and had chosen to shorten their journey. As Mohammed recalls:

I sold my home, I had an apartment – I've sold it, I don't need it – and escaped to Turkey... [I stayed for] 7 days or so. [...] I passed through Izmir, and from Izmir [I went] straight to Chios (Mohammed, male, 40 years old).

The first category of Syrian refugees, those who stayed in Turkey for a longer period of time, searched for a place to stay and in many cases even found work in the local labour market. However, because of the geographic limitations imposed by the Turkish government, many Syrians faced various restrictions which intensified their precarity (Baban *et al.* 2017). Based on our interviews, access to the labour market was usually granted through the informal sector. More often than not, the jobs of Syrian refugees involved long working hours, were deskilled and poorly paid, and were in workplaces where exploitation and work precarity prevailed. Aischa, who stayed 3 years in Istanbul, testifies to this:

I worked in clothing and fabric manufacturing. It was good, (...) but it was tiring. We used to work from 8:30 [in the morning] until 19:30 [at night]. But there was only a 1 hour break, at around 2 pm (Aischa, female, 30 years old).

Joram complained that the working conditions were poor in Turkey and many times, in the end, Syrians were exploited and did not get paid:

When you work [for a Turkish employer] you can't ask for money, for your wages. When you ask for your wages, they send you back to Syria. [...] And you [end up] working for free (Joram, male, late 20s).

Hasan, after staying and working in Turkey for 4 years, hoped for better living and working conditions in Greece. As he describes:

After I went to Turkey, I worked into restaurants. In Gaziantep and Istanbul. I have learnt Turkish, but I was hoping that Greece was better than Turkey (Hasan, male, 23 years old).

A chance for a better future was also in the mind of Aischa, who relates:

We went to an area called Çanakkale, [...]. If you live there, you can see Greece from there, and then in Istanbul. I got a boat and came to Mytilene [...] but, in Turkey, there was no respect for a Syrian person, and there was no future for my children. So, I left on their account... (Aischa, female, 30 years old).

### 3.3. *Living conditions and aspirations in an open reception camp*

After 2015, images of the «poor», «horrible» and inhumane living conditions of asylum seekers and refugees in the Aegean reception centres were the predominant theme of the media coverage of the migrant/refugee crisis. Although Syrian refugees have lived for shorter lengths of time in the Aegean camps than other nationalities among the asylum seekers, they tend to describe those overcrowded places with poor hygienic conditions where inmates may have to queue for several hours to access basic needs such as food and toilet. As Ali, who arrived in Greece with his family from Turkey, remembers:

I stayed in Mytilene for two months and 15 days. On the island, there were 4 families together in one tent. It was so difficult to live! One place had so many people (Ali, male early 30s).

Others go even further and describe the conditions in the island camps as «hell». As they could not endure the detrimental to their health living conditions in the camps, they attempted to find other temporary accommodation until they were relocated to the mainland. As Mohammed describes:

When I arrived on Chios, I stayed 3 or 4 days at the camp, the living was so bad, horrible in the camp. [...] 3-4 days were hell. I went to Chios, rented a house, stayed there for 3 months and then the Un [Unchr] said there's a travel to Andravida [a town in Western Greece] (Mohammed, male, 40 years old).

The majority of Syrians considered the facilities and daily life in the open camp in Western Greece to be better than living conditions in the Aegean camps. However, they emphatically mention «waiting» – a sense of being in limbo – as a major problem they have to face. Living in an open camp means they are waiting until they can take the next step(s) in their lives. This «waiting status» may involve a plurality of facets directly interlinked with the Syrians' aspirations for a better life. They are «waiting on» an interview which may lead to their acquiring refugee status; they are «waiting on» relocation, on finding a job and, more generally, on moving on away from the condition of «involuntary immobility» (Carling 2002) they experience in the open camp.

Moreover, the vast majority acknowledge that their feelings of security have increased:

[Here in Western Greece] it is better than in Syria, so for a waiting period it is Ok (Hassan, male, 23 years old).

It is nice [here] but boring. Spending time, waiting. Sleep, food, sleep, food, that's everything. It is like living in prison. But no walls (Usama, male, mid-20s).

This «waiting» period or state of liminality is central to understanding the refugee integration process (Mzayek 2019). Finding a job in the local labour market and/or learning the local language are considered crucial for getting away from this state of waiting. As Elias argues:

I think that people, real people, cannot stay any more like we are in the camp. So, you know, we have very long free time, we don't know what to do. The humans must do something, if it's his job or anything else, so it is a bit boring here, yes. For me, it's my opinion. I want to find job, to continue my life, like in Greece like everybody around the world (Elias, male, early 30s).

Indeed, a number of Syrian refugees have attempted to get work in the fields surrounding their camp in Western Greece, where extra hands are needed for the harvest. However, some faced precarious working conditions similar to those they encountered in Turkey. As Usama (male, mid-20s) explained, he was working with a farmer in the local greenhouses. He was paid 15 euros for 9 hours or even longer. It should be noted that, in general, the lowest day wage in the area is around 18-20 euros. Others like Mohammed complain that, despite working, they never got paid. He argued that he worked for 20 days harvesting olives, but in the end the farmer avoided him and refused to pay him. Such labour abuse reminds us of incidents of exploitation when Albanians were newly arrived in Greece in the early 1990s. At that time, their irregular status in the labour market was used as an excuse for poor working conditions and limited rights.

Many Syrian refugees argued that the availability of employment opportunities and integration measures such as language learning are vital if they are to remain in the country instead of continuing their journey to other European countries. During the interviews, many of our respondents showed themselves to be fully informed about Greece's economic recession and their employments prospects. As Mohammed explained:

I spent 2 years almost in Greece, I don't know the Greek language, such a shame, living in a country 2 years and not learning the language! There was no opportunity to find work [...]. Just getting the 150 euros and waiting [...]. Everybody like the [European] Community people, Greece, all countries, great for living. But the problem is we can't find a job, can't find a place to learn language, this problem is hard to stay here. So, everyone deciding to leave (Mohammed, male, 40 years old).

In the end, it seems that they reach their destination when they feel their aspirations have been fulfilled. As Hasan argues:

I plan to find a country who is accepting me to stay there. Forever (Hassan, male, 23 years old).

Escaping war and conflict in Syrian does not mean that aspirations for social mobility have been left behind. Rather,

I went all the way from Syria, and I did all this, just so my children can become doctors. This is my dream, only this (Aischa, female, 30 years old).

Due to their high rate at which their applications for asylum and refugee status are accepted, Syrians in Greece appear to enjoy better living conditions compared to other new arrivals. Moreover, their prospects for improving their well-being are higher, while they also receive a degree of financial assistance for the acquisition of food and basic goods and paid accommodation. However, the empirical research has shown their family relations, experiences and perceptions are important components in their aspirations and future plans. Their experiences in Greece are not easily comparable with their experiences in Turkey and, in many cases, they consider the move to Greece as an improvement. However, Syrians face numerous problems in Greece because they stay inactive and remain in limbo for a long time until they get their papers approved; in the meantime, they are anxious about «getting a real life». Their integration into the Greek labour market is one possible option, but due to the effects of the economic recession the only jobs available are in the secondary labour market. The Syrians who have entered Greece aspire to better conditions and have actually obtained a relatively better future compared to those who stayed in Turkey, having in their minds their return to homeland. Syrians remain attached to their families, which can be considered a compass for their future decisions. Their life (dis)satisfaction, aspirations and their dwindling hope of returning to Syria guide their decision to come to Greece and, for many of them, to eventually migrate onwards to another Eu country. Many of them aspire to form a successful Syrian diaspora in the years to come.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Greece has faced numerous challenges in relation to the management of migrant and refugee flows. These have stemmed from Eu pressure to deal with the «humanitarian crisis», domestic reactions to accommodating the new arrivals, and the state's limited capacity to face the expanding flows. Greece's asylum and migration policy retreated into defensive measures such as seeking to deter new arrivals, while the country was simultaneously obliged to abide by European rules and practices. The conditions in which the newly arrived populations live are heavily affected by the (un) official state policy of «deterrence».

A number of social and spatial justice claims made on various spatial scales (Fraser 2010) should be mentioned here. First, there are claims made by the Ecre and Unhcr that the Dublin Regulation impedes the legal rights and personal welfare of asylum seekers, including the right to a fair examination of their asylum claim. There is also an uneven distribution of asylum claims among Eu countries.

Second, the Relocation Scheme formulated to face the challenges created by the «migration and refugee crisis» and assure an equitable distribution of asylum claimants among the Eu countries failed to deliver the required outcomes, revealing the lack of solidarity within the Eu.

Third, the «geographical restriction» introduced as a given to make sure that those who are not granted asylum or refugee status are sent back to Turkey did not function as designed; by detracting from the living conditions of migrants and refugees, it had an immense impact on island populations.

Fourth, the (un)official national policy of «deterrence» aiming at discouraging migrants from crossing the border has territorialized migration policy and created special detention zones that also affect the well-being of the local populations.

Fifth, Syrians seem to enjoy better living conditions compared to the other newly arriving populations; identified as worthy of protection, they are therefore relocated more easily from the islands to the mainland. This introduces a divide among the different groups of the newly arrived. Another point seems to be a division among the newly arrived who are transferred to the mainland and the rest who remain restricted to the islands and face the threat of deportation. Another aspect of the same divide is that those who are depicted as vulnerable populations (e.g. families, children) tend to be transferred to the mainland.

Sixth, Syrians, like the other arriving populations in Greece, are rendered immobile by the regulations restricting them geographically to the particular municipalities to which they have been allocated. This would seem to «neutralize» them as clients of an asylum system that does not seem to offer any further advancement. Moreover, transnational Syrian families devise strategies to reunite in Western European countries.

Seventh, this inactivity (which is considered to be a transitory phase) may last for many months or years and leads to limited agency the protected populations, who have expressed a need to actively search for employment and to actively integrate into the host society. Younger people show a greater ability to join the labour market and integrate, while older people are less able to participate in the local economy and society.

Finally, the capacity of the host society to receive and integrate the arriving populations remains limited, not only because of the impact of austerity, but also due to the indigenous population's reluctance to accept the newcomers. The new arrivals look forward to their transfer to other Eu regions which are considered to have better infrastructures for receiving and providing for them, while also offering them employment and improved living conditions.

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