

Asylum-seekers' integration: The time has come

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Summary:

Although four years have passed since the 2015 refugee "crisis", Greece's reception system is still inadequate in serving the needs of the arriving populations. Since current debates focus on the weaknesses of the reception system, the issue of asylum-seekers and refugees' integration has been indirectly outweighed. Without underestimating the issue of reception, this policy brief argues that the current political, social and environmental developments highlight the need to move towards decentralized and locally-oriented integration policies. After discussing the past context and the current developments of migration in Greece, we highlight the political, utilitarian and moral reasons that render integration policies both necessary and beneficiary for the domestic and migrant populations. Finally, we conclude with some recommendations regarding the way forward.

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- The current political, social and environmental developments highlight the need to move towards decentralized and locally-oriented integration policies.
- Integration policies are necessary since they constitute a strong barrier against xenophobia and racism, and minimize fear towards the unknown "other".
- The integration of asylum-seekers is beneficial for the host countries since they raise the workforce without increasing unemployment, introduce new skills to the labour market, support the social insurance system, increase productivity and consumption, and constitute a counter-measure for demographic ageing.
- Integration policies should be applied no matter if asylum-seekers return to their country of origin or move to another European country.
- The next steps should focus on transferring asylum-seekers in apartments within the urban fabric, securing access to labour market and attendance of minors in schools, and introducing mandatory language courses.
- Integration policies should be consistently accompanied by information campaigns addressed to the local communities.
- Citizenship should be considered the ultimate target of all the integration policies.

Introduction

The Greek experience of the 2015 refugee “crisis” brought an unresolved issue to the forefront; the social integration of third-country nationals. An issue which we ought to take into consideration, since the flows of forced displaced populations will continue rising due to continuous conflicts, climate change, and demographic changes observed in many African countries in combination with increased unemployment rates. Although four years have passed since the outbreak of the refugee “crisis”, Greece's reception system is still inadequate in serving the needs of the arriving populations. Since current debates focus on the weaknesses of the reception system, the issue of integration of asylum-seekers and refugees has been indirectly crowded out. Without underestimating the issue of reception, this policy brief argues that the current political, social and environmental developments highlight the need to move towards decentralized and locally-oriented integration policies. In what follows, first, we briefly sketch out the (lack of) integration policies in Greece during the past years; second, we delve into the developments that followed the 2015 refugee “crisis” and outline the characteristics of the migrant population; third, we underline the reasons why forthcoming policies should focus on integration; fourth, we sketch-out what Greeks think about integration; and finally, we provide some suggestions regarding the way forward.

The Past Context of Integration

The dissolution of the former communist regimes in the beginning of the 1990s changed the geopolitical map of Europe, transforming Greece from a country of origin of migrants to a reception country. The rise of migration flows in the 1990s was unprecedented, with migration being treated as a temporary issue until the beginning of 2000s (Anagnostou, 2016: 44). Nevertheless, instead of integration policies, Greece's migration strategy was characterized mainly by deterrence policies, such as apprehensions and deportations. Although this seemed to incrementally change during the 2000s, the only integration policies of the country were limited to the provision of long-term residence permits (Dimitriadi, 2018; Savvakis, 2012: 83). The development of integration policies emerged as a necessity in the aftermath of the wars in the Middle East and the subsequent rise of migrant flows from North East Asia and the MENA region. However, still political actors did not share a common understanding of what migrants' integration in Greek society actually meant. According to the 2011 population census, the migrant population residing in Greece was estimated at 900,000, of which almost 200,000 were EU nationals (ELSTAT, 2019). Despite the fact that third-country nationals have resided in Greece for more than 30 years, an organized integration plan is still missing, with migrants actually being "self-integrated" in the domestic reality.

Current Developments

Migration is everything but a temporal phenomenon. The history of human civilization has been constructed on people's mobility, both forced and voluntary. In 2017, 22.3 million or 4.4% of the EU-28 population residing in the EU were non-EU nationals, with those living in Germany, the UK, Italy, France and Spain representing 76% of all non-EU nationals in Europe, while around 18 million EU-nationals lived in another EU member-state (Eurostat, 2019 March). As stated at the beginning, international developments seem to encourage forced migration much more compared to previous years. Almost 71 million people are currently forcefully displaced, with 26 million being refugees and almost 42 million being internally displaced in their countries of origin (UNHCR, 2019b June 19). 80% of refugees live in neighboring countries, while Turkey (3.7 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), Uganda (1.1 million), Sudan (1.1 million) and Germany (1.1 million) host the largest shares of the displaced population globally (UNHCR, 2019b June 19).

In the summer of 2015, Greece experienced a steep increase in migratory flows. In particular, the country received 43 thousand irregular migrants¹ in 2014, 861 thousand in 2015, 174 thousand in 2016, 36 thousand in 2017, 50 thousand in 2018 and 46 thousand in 2019 (UNHCR, 2019, October 13).

¹ The term irregular migrant reflects irregular entry in the EU and thus include asylum seekers, forced migrants and economically motivated migration.

Most of them sought to reach other European states. The closure of the Balkan passageway in the early 2016 and the EU-Turkish Statement in March 2016 contributed to trapping a number of asylum-seekers in the Greek mainland and North East Aegean islands. For this, together with the development of the reception conditions, policies advocating for the smooth and mutually beneficial integration of third-country nationals in the Greek society are a necessary, pragmatic need.

As we stated earlier, Greece's reception system is characterized by great deficiencies. Current developments seem to reflect broader problems in reception and asylum services prior to the 2015 refugee "crisis". Past reports produced by international organizations clearly state that many people in need of international protection could not proceed with asylum application, since they were refused entry to land borders, "pushed-back" at sea or deported after being arrested; in some cases, returns did not follow any formal procedure at all (UNHCR, 2009 December, p.3). In this respect, the decision of the European Court of Human Rights to convict Greece on the *M.S.S. vs Belgium and Greece* case and suspend the transfers under Dublin to Greece was the tip of the iceberg. The new Asylum Service, which was introduced in 2011 (practically in 2013), aimed to ease the procedures for asylum application and treat the aforementioned inconsistencies. Nevertheless, the increased migratory flows during the following years raised an extra burden for the asylum procedure. Quite indicative here is that between June 2013 and August 2019, Greece received around 246,000 asylum applications. More than 45,000 applicants have been granted international protection in the first degree of asylum application, and more than 53,000 have been rejected, with the vast majority of applicants coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq (Asylum Service, 2019). On aggregate, between June 2013 and August 2019, 68% of asylum-applicants were male, while almost 50% of all the applicants were between 18-34 years old and around 23.5% were below the age of 13 (Asylum Service, 2019). By August 2019, around 70,000 first degree asylum applications were still pending (Asylum Service, 2019).

To sum up, in 2018 Greece hosted 61,000 recognized refugees and 76,000 asylum-seekers, while according to the latest data in September 2019, there are around 96,500 refugees and asylum-seekers, 30,700 of them residing in the islands and 65,800 in the mainland (UNHCR, 2019a June 19, p.66; UNHCR, 2019 August 24). Although the vast majority of refugees and asylum-seekers arrived in the country after 2015, they came to be added to around 524,000 migrants legally residing in Greece, with Albanians comprising almost 68% of the migratory population (Ministry of Migration Policy, 2019 July: 21-24).

Why should Greece focus on integration from now on?

Forced and voluntary mobility of people will continue unabated. The question that now rises is why integration should be the response. The first reason for defending integration policies is out of political necessity, since the absence of integration policies encourages the rise of reactionary politics, and particularly far-right wing discourses. Greece, as well as other countries with poor integration policies, experienced, on the one hand, the growth of neo-Nazi formations, and on the other hand, the infiltration of far-right wing elements within mainstream conservative parties. With migration being top priority in right-wing populist agendas all over the world, integration policies constitute a strong barrier against xenophobia and racism. Critical accounts on integration may reverse the argument and deem the failure of integration politics as the cause for the rise of far-right. France is probably an indicative example of failed integration policies, which gave rise to far-right extremism. Nevertheless, although in theory France implemented a multicultural model of integration which failed, this was characterized by great social and class inequalities. Second-generation migrants became synonymous with second-class citizens, with the French banlieues populated with underprivileged residents. In this respect, the problem of failed integration is not located in the integration per se; rather, it is identified with the way integration models are applied. Currently, criticism on integration policies is located at the different religious characteristics asylum-seekers have compared to the domestic population. Without underestimating the difficulties these differences might create in certain localities, this argument seems quite fragile and is often linked with Islamophobia. In secular societies, religious affairs are not issues of top priority. More importantly, the peaceful co-existence of citizens coming from various religious backgrounds in many European cities over the years does not confirm empirically the aforementioned standpoint. It is particularly the two-way integration policies that are able to bring closer different social and cultural understandings, and minimize fear towards the unknown.

The second argument has a utilitarian reasoning, with migration pictured as a beneficial development for the host country. Migrants contribute to raising the workforce and introducing skills that are in need by the host countries. The benefits of migration were acknowledged during the reconstruction of many European countries in the aftermath of WW2 by migrant workers, and were widely appreciated given the migrants' contributions to the fragile European welfare systems in the 1980s. In the case of Greece, research conducted at ELIAMEP shows that migrants were of great support to the national social insurance system, while they maintained a number of professions that were either in need for personnel or under threat of extinction, such as sectors of social care, agriculture and construction (Triandafyllidou and Maroufof, 2008: 20-25, 30-31; Gropas and Triandafyllidou, 2005: 1, 10; Triandafyllidou, 2005: 40-43). At the state level, migration is associated with increase in productivity and consumption. At the same time, research has shown that it is not linked directly with the rise of unemployment, since the migrant population is not competing for the

same jobs with the domestic population (Skleparis, 2018). Among the most crucial aspects is that migration constitutes a counter-measure for demographic ageing in Europe. Only in 2017, the average age of the EU population was 43 years, while the average age of migrants was estimated at 28 years. This in turn decreases the workforce's average age limit by enabling the entrance of younger people to the labour market, as well as boosting the European welfare systems in favour of the elderly domestic population. Although research shows that migration is not a long-term solution for countering the low fertility rates observed in Greece, at the same time it decreases the country's negative demographic balance of deaths over births (Kotzamanis and Karkanis, 2019).

The recent economic crisis has largely affected the fragile welfare systems of South European countries, with many arguing that these are not able to handle the increased pressure of asylum-seekers. This is a valid argument, since the welfare systems have not yet overcome the damage of austerity. Therefore, efforts to increase responsibility-sharing with the rest of Member-States are necessary, since the refugee "crisis" is a European issue and the South European borders are also Europe's border. At the same time, we have to bear in mind that every attempt to upgrade the national welfare systems, in terms of hospitals, schools, equipment and so on, will benefit the total population residing in South European countries and not only migrants.

The moral argument constitutes the last thematic point to stress in favour of integration. Responsibility for providing assistance to suffering populations is both a legal obligation with regard to the protection of human rights and the right to asylum, and a moral one when it comes to the values of social equality and justice. The same moral values can be used by those in favour of repatriation policies, since the repatriation of displaced populations is inextricably linked with the restoration of peace and development in the countries of origin. Recent data provided by IOM indicate that between June 2015 and August 2019 almost 17,000 third-country nationals voluntarily returned from Greece to their countries of origin (IOM, 2019, August 30). Although this stands true for certain cases, where the national or local settings allow returnees' re-integration, it is not an option for others: Syria, for instance, is estimated to be deemed safe with respect to the standards of living in no less than 5 years. Thus, even if displaced populations return back to their countries, this does not mean that no integration should be applied. Taking into consideration that asylum-seekers are roughly disengaged from their previous educational, professional, social and cultural life, the social exclusion in the host countries not only prevents them from further developing their skills, but will definitely not assist the development of their country of origin when they return. The same applies for those asylum-seekers currently residing in Greece and seeking to be hosted in other European countries. In this sense, integration does not only apply to migrants' inclusion in the host country, but it reflects a broader approach against social exclusion applied in every social setting.

Greeks' view on integration

It is now interesting to see how the aforementioned approaches can be translated into numbers. One of the most crucial steps towards integration is the proper provision of information. This seems rather disappointing both for Greeks and for the rest of Europeans. In particular, 69% of Greeks think that they are not well-informed on issues of immigration and integration (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T5). Having this in mind, 47% of Europeans think that there are at least 'as many illegally staying immigrants as there are legally staying immigrants' in the host countries (Eurobarometer 2018, p.5), while 58% of Greeks believe that there are more migrants staying irregularly in Greece compared to those staying legally (Eurobarometer 2018, p.5). Of course, these assumptions vividly contradict the available data for the EU, which attests that "during 2016, 984,000 third-country nationals were found to be illegally present in the EU, while 21.6 million of third-country nationals were legally residing in the EU" (Eurobarometer 2018, p.10). Moreover, only 14% of Greeks estimated correctly that migrants are between 6% and 12% of the total population (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T4).

As the recent Eurobarometer survey suggests, the majority of Greeks believe that migrants' integration is unsuccessful both at the national and at the city level (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T21-22), while they also believe that migrants do not contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of the country (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T28-30). Although 70% of Europeans think of integration as a positive future investment, the respective percentage for Greeks moves significantly lower around 50% (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T71).

In general, integration is perceived as a two-way process. This means that both migrant populations and the host communities have the responsibility to develop a balanced relationship with each other. Starting with what migrants should do in order to integrate in the Greek society, Greeks believe that sharing Greek cultural traditions (81%), speaking Greek (96%), accepting the values and norms (89%), paying taxes (99%), having Greek friends (81%), having the educational skills to find a job (94%) and acquiring citizenship (60%) are important factors that will allow immigrants to integrate (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T32-40). Moving on the side of the Greek state and society, more than 85% of Greeks think that informing the local community regarding migrants is an adequate step towards integration, while the introduction of mandatory integration programmes, orientation and language courses, job guidance and recognition of migrants' qualifications upon arrival are additional factors that boost social inclusion (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T47-55). More than 75% of Greeks agree that mingling nationalities in schools and neighbourhoods, recognizing same rights for migrants as for Greeks in education, health and social services, and introducing stronger measures against migrants' discrimination complement the necessary measures for integration (Eurobarometer 2018, p.T55-59).

The way forward

The official post-2015 state policies far from correspond to the aforementioned suggestions. First and foremost, the de-urbanization policies of the Greek state fostered the ghettoization of migrants in remote and overcrowded camps, with poor living conditions. Apart from violation of basic human rights, this de-urbanization process erases any possibility for migrants to engage with the so-called Greek values and traditions, as well as preventing asylum-seekers from developing ties with the host society and the domestic population. Recent efforts to transfer asylum-seekers from the islands to the Greek mainland are deemed positive, and they should be combined with integration practices within the urban fabric. The aforementioned suggestions do not seem to be taken into account either following recent developments, with the eviction of refugee squats and the removal of their tenants from the Athens urban centre to refugee camps in Korinthos and Northern Greece, as well as the government's declarations for turning the open refugee camps into close structures. For this, we suggest that the transfer of asylum-seekers in apartments within the urban fabric is more than necessary.

Second, asylum-seekers should be directly integrated in the labour market. Apart from securing asylum-seekers' right to Social Security Number, it is more than crucial for the Greek state to introduce separate procedures for officially recognizing their previous educational and professional experience. The prescribed steps for doing so are time-consuming and complicated. The recognition of professional and educational skills of asylum-seekers will enable their labour integration, but also may be of great help for easing the integration of other asylum-seekers. This is for instance a practice followed by many NGOs employing former refugees to assist current asylum-seekers.

Third, the safe attendance of asylum-seekers minors in schools should be secured by all means. The xenophobic reactions expressed by some parent associations and the increasing number of minors not attending school in the islands (UNHCR, 2019, August 29) should be immediately addressed by the respective Ministries. Moreover, thinking of language learning as a critical step for engaging with the Greek society, it is quite problematic that this is currently provided only by a few municipal authorities, some NGOs, and one public university. In this respect, the new EU-funded project "Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS)" targeting asylum-seekers integration is on the right track.

Our last point concerns the issue of citizenship and the naturalization of refugees, which is usually considered the end point of the integration trip. With regard to Greece, this seems to be out of

question. The 2015 parliamentary debates on citizenship for the second generation emphatically showed how different the standpoints of Greek political parties are. Nevertheless, citizenship is both a motive for asylum-seekers and refugees to integrate faster in Greek society, and a policy that can raise tolerance against the “other” within domestic population on the long run. Therefore, it should be considered the ultimate target of all the aforementioned integration proposals. At the same time, these policies should be consistently accompanied by information campaigns addressed to the local communities in order to raise awareness, decrease xenophobic sentiments and show that their concerns are taken into consideration.

Right-wing populist discourses within the EU place principal emphasis on security, equating migrants and refugees with a (social, political, cultural, religious) threat. In practice, this is further encouraged by the EU's focus on border controls and repatriation policies. If attention does not shift towards integration policies, migrants will turn elsewhere, for instance the informal labour market or be exploited by criminal networks, for securing coverage of their basic needs. Nevertheless, we should be cautious with respect to the aforementioned suggestions. National top-down integration plans often fail to understand the needs of the local environment and what this requires for the integration of migrants. Of course, the state should provide the necessary legal framework for securing asylum-seekers, allowing them to meet basic needs, such as housing, education, medical care, employment and so on, but the rest of social and cultural frameworks related to integration should be decentralized and locally-oriented. With respect to Greece, the latest integration plan suggested in 2019 aims to provide municipal authorities with the legal mandate to integrate third-country nationals (Ministry of Migration Policy, 2019 July). Although this plan has found only very limited application, we maintain that decentralized local policies are on the right direction in fostering the integration of migrants.

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